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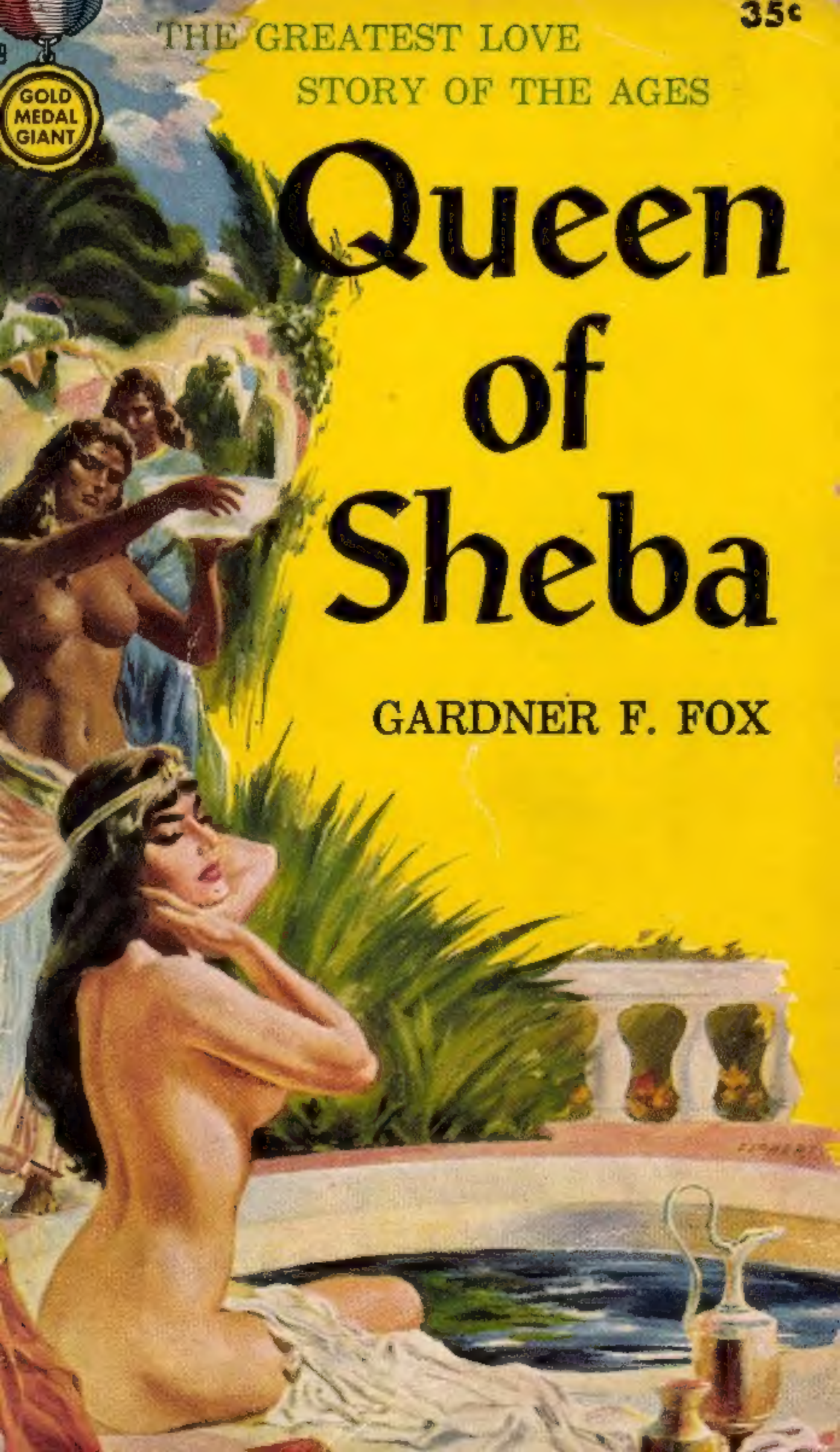
Queen of Sheba

GARDNER F. FOX



SHEBA

He went up over the wall like a gazelle jumping, hands flat to its capping, legs twisting up and sideways. As he came down lightly in a clump of flowering narcissus, he realized that there was someone else in the garden.

A naked girl was standing to her ankles in a pool, staring at him.

In the full flood of the moon she was like a silver statue, frozen into lifelessness by surprise. The water at her ankles gleamed with pallid fire, adding radiance to her skin by reflection. And Solomon sensed in her something of the same fierce hunger that was gnawing him.

Almost casually she bent forward for a misty cloak, and then she strode from the pool, challenge emanating from her swinging hips and legs.

In the distance, a temple began its clanging roll.

The sound put a flame in Solomon, freeing him from the spell into which the sight of her had frozen him. He went to meet her, his iron sword still clutched in one hand.

She took his breath away. Her ivory skin was smooth and rich. The thick black hair piled atop her head for bathing was set here and there with golden wires from which dangled golden balls and silver teardrops. There was a radiance about her, and a slumbrous sensuality that tugged at something deep inside him.

She touched his naked arm. "You have killed a man," she said softly.

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Queen of Sheba

A GOLD MEDAL ORIGINAL BY

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Cover Painting by Jack Floherty, Jr.

GOLD MEDAL BOOKS
FAWCETT PUBLICATIONS, INC., NEW YORK

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First Printing, January 1956

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Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

TEN CENTURIES before the birth of Jesus Christ, a king named Solomon was the wisest man in the world. The remembrance of that wisdom has come down to us across three thousand years. He was a man of God, as well: He was to build a great temple that would endure in the minds of men (if not in the stone and cedar with which it was formed) as a monument to his faith. To the lovely Temple, he was to add a Royal Palace, a Throne Hall, a Hall of Pillars, and a building known curiously as the House of the Forest of Lebanon.

Solomon the king was also a man: a very human man, frail in spirit if not in flesh, and the memory of this too has come down to us, in his immortal *Song of Songs,* and in his strange love affair with Balkis, who was the then queen of Sheba.

In my researches, a curious fact insists upon intruding. It is recorded that the queen of Sheba visited Solomon only once, but the myths and fancies of men and women who lived after their time have pictured that meeting as more than a mere visit between two rulers. Solomon and Sheba loved one another. Everywhere that fact is accepted, although the evidence to support it is missing. From a single visit paid the man who ruled Israel by the woman who ruled Saba, which was also called Sheba, in Arabia Felix, the world has built a romance. Surely there is more to the legend than that.

Gradually, as I went deeper into the lives of the men and women of those times, the story began to build itself. . . .

QUEEN OF SHEBA

Chapter One

THE MAN FLED through the narrow, twisted alleyways of the high market section of Jerusalem. It had been a mistake to come here. He should have bypassed this city that lay along the caravan routes from the Red Sea port of Ezion-Geber northward into Phoenicia, and gone on to Tyre. As he ran, his fingers tightened about the long slim object he carried wrapped in a dirty sheepskin—and he vowed no man would take it from him.

His entire future lay in this curving stick he carried. For more than half his thirty years, Rhynthos the Cretan had traveled the far corners of the world, always searching for a personal philosopher's stone that would make his fortune. Other men chose to scribble on a papyrus roll or sail a river barge or marry some rich man's only daughter in order to fill their coffers. Such a course was not for Rhynthos, who was an islander with wandering blood in his veins.

He had traveled to every corner of the known world. From the Pillars of Herakles, which faced upon the endless sea that poured its waters eternally over the rim of the

world, he had sailed north to misty islands where hairy savages lived. He had been to Oea and the Tyrian colonies bordering the inland sea along the African coast. His eyes had seen the colossus that straddled the harbor of Rhodes. In Latium, his nose had smelled the hot lava and ashes that gushed redly from a great volcano close by a village of the Samnites. From the land of the Lotus Eaters, he had ventured to the black waters of the Thracian Sea; and beyond that, far to the east, until his sandals had trod the dusty cobbles of a city called Baktra. Here he had heard tales of a strange yellow race that lived across thousands of miles of desert land, but these he did not believe.

In all those travels and during all those years, Rhynthos had hunted for the magical stone that would make him rich. He dealt in skins and perfumes, bronze swords from Paphos and Athenian glassware, but his eyes had searched the stalls and the open shops and the stinking holds of ships for the one precious thing that would cause, like the fabled touch of Midas, a golden shower for his coffers.

Now he carried it, wrapped in a dirty sheepskin, and a man sought to take it away from him. He had found it only a month before, in a weapons shop in Saba. Rhynthos knew he had only himself to blame for going into the tavern at the wall gate, where travelers to Jerusalem in this ninth year of the reign of King Solomon gathered to wash the dusts of Israel from their parched throats. He had been extraordinarily thirsty, even for a man from Knossos. The red Thasian wine had been faintly tart, the way he always liked his wines. One leather jack called for another, and after that, just one more.

It was while he was finishing his fifth jack that the Israelite captain had bumped into him and sent the sheepskin unwinding across the stone floor of the inn. The officer had been a big man, rather splendid in bronze corse-

let and greaves, with a long sword hanging from a belt studded with silver plates. He had carried a crested helmet under an arm, and walked with a swagger that swung his long red cloak arrogantly.

The officer had been making some sort of apology—he was more than a little drunk himself, Rhynthos noted with a strange sort of satisfaction—when he had gasped harshly and stared.

The skeepskin had unwound itself; his treasure had lain there on the stone floor, for all eyes to see. Most of the visitors to the tavern, camel men from Babylon and Kish just in from the long caravan trip across the red desert, had merely hiccuped and turned back to their taut wineskins and leather noggins, but the captain had been too smart.

"By the sacred scrolls!" he had whispered. "I've never seen anything like that!"

Rhynthos had screamed and lunged forward, grabbing up the precious stick and wrapping it up in the loose woolly hide as he backed toward the open doorway. "You won't take it from me! I paid good money for it. Yes, and fifteen years of my life! I won't be cheated! No king's officer is going to take it from me while I'm alive and able to run!"

The hostel owner had waddled from behind his barrel counter, shouting at him. The Cretan had put a hand into his leather purse and hurled a handful of silver coins across a nearby tabletop; then he was whirling, rushing up the stone slabs that were the steps of the tavern, and out into the clear spring night. Frantically his eyes searched this way and that. Overhead the great wall towered, its wooden gates barred and bolted for the night. No escape there.

Rhynthos darted down the gateway street, whispering a prayer to Bel that he could escape the Israelite officer who was roaring so lustily and following at his heels.

Solomon yawned.

His hand moved out angrily, sweeping the papyrus rolls from the polished top of his ebony table, sending them bouncing and scattering across the tiled floor. His dark eyes studied them for a moment in their rolling course, then his foot lashed out and hit the table itself, driving it across the room.

"Work! Always work! Plans for the Temple, plans for the Palace! Conferences with Nathan and with the architects from Tyre! I'm tired of it!"

For a moment his mind toyed with the thought of entering the women's quarters and demanding that Anohbet amuse him with her body, but Anohbet was part of the restlessness that held him in thrall these days. She was the daughter of Siamon, who was pharoah of Egypt, and Solomon could never forget it. Or was it that she did not allow him to forget it?

Israel stood in awe of Egypt. Solomon suspected it was because his people could not erase from their minds the fact that they had lived there once, within the shadows of the massive temples, and had heard the chanting to Amon-Ra, sun god, and seen the miracles of art and architecture that the peoples of the Nile had accomplished. Egyptian culture went back thousands of years. The Israelites were newcomers on the world stage, having been wanderers as far back as any of their scrolls recorded—a nomad tribe from Arabia, to the south. Abraham had brought them out of Ur, much later, and across the wastelands of Shinar and Aram. Joseph took them into Egypt, and Moses took them out.

In the time of his own father, David, Saul had founded the kingdom. He was the ruler of a nation so young that some wrinkled graybeards in his realm could remember when the patriarchs, and not Saul, had ruled the people. Oh, they had made strides, Solomon knew; tremendous strides, with a fierce pride that enabled their smaller

armies to smash those of Cana and Philistia. That pride almost bridged the gap between a hundred centuries of Egypt and a hundred years of Israel—but not quite.

Anohbet was Egypt, to Solomon. Every time he saw her, he remembered the history of his people. While he loved her, he stood in awe of her. She was his wife, but she was also the symbol of her country.

"She thinks she did me a favor by marrying me!" he exclaimed bitterly. "She forgets that my father and I made Israel a great nation—almost greater now than her precious Egypt!"

He came to his feet and moved swiftly toward the outer stairway of the palace, where he could climb to the flat, railed roof. A tall man, with broad shoulders and a wide chest, he seemed more a soldier playing statesman than he did a king. From Bathsheba, who was his mother, he had inherited the fine profile and clear skin of the Hittites. David, his father, who had been king in Jerusalem before him, had left him the athletic body, lean and sinewy, that was the heritage of the shepherd people of Israel. His black hair was thick and curly, set now with a thin diadem of beaten gold. The tunic that draped his body was girdled by a chain of heavy golden links and edged with red Tyrian dye. A scarlet mantle fell in graceful folds from his wide shoulders.

Solomon put his hands on the marble rooftop rail and stared off across the palace gardens toward the Temple. For almost a year now that magnificent structure had stood as a monument to his people's worship of Yahweh. From the gold and silver captured by David, his father, from the Amalekites and Ammonites, with hewn stones from the Valley of Cedron and with red cedars of Lebanon, Solomon had built the Temple. Foreigners came from Knossos and from Memphis in Egypt, and from as far away as Latium itself to stroll the outer court and marvel at its pillared gracefulness. They praised the

Temple and the wisdom of its builder with equal fervor.

His hand hit the balcony railing with savage fury. No man but himself knew that he had built that great edifice half out of a feeling of guilt. As David was his father, so Bathsheba was his mother, and it was from this same rooftop that David had stared eastward toward the house of Uriah the Hittite and seen Bathsheba at her bath.

David and Bathsheba had sinned greatly. Of this fact Nathan the prophet never tired of reminding him, when he sought to bend him to his will. The inclination to the sins of the flesh that was his heritage from his brawny father was as much a part of his character as the strong body that the shepherd-king had given him. Thinking of that made him remember coppery Anohbet again.

Solomon told himself he was a fool to stand in awe of her. But she was so lovely, with her fine Coptic profile and slender body! Her lips were as red as the rubies of Persis, and her eyes glittered in their setting of green malachite paste like the fabled jewels of Noh. Even as his palms itched to cradle her full, heavy breasts, so his spirit ached to bend her submissively to his will.

Damn her pride! Damn the haughty languor of the woman, which held her so aloof and remote from him, with that scornful twist of her full lips! The gentle sway of her shapely body was like a sneer for these people of Israel, and its young king as well. Solomon made a big fist of his hand. Yahweh granting, he would tame that Egyptian pride, and bring it to its knees before his throne.

Solomon hesitated. A look of anguish crossed his face, of anguish and yearning and inner frustration. He whispered to the night wind that came creeping up out of Cana and across the streets of Jerusalem to fan his cheeks, "Not to my throne, but to me. To me as a man, not as a king! On her knees, begging for my love!"

Solomon was a rare king. He was in love with his queen.

Bitterly he knew that this pride and this desire were

a part of the restlessness that festered in him. If Anohbet loved him, as he loved her! Ah, then he would have been more than content to work over papyrus rolls by the light of the bronze oil lamps, night after night.

Below him at the garden wall, a man cried out harshly.

Curious, Solomon leaned forward, conscious that his heart was hammering. Any break in this monotony would be thrice welcome. His keen eyes searched the towering palm trees and the short tamarisk bushes that lay side by side with flowering oleanders and jasmines between the garden walks. Now he could hear the pound of feet, and the faint outcries of an angry man.

Solomon stood straighter, unaware that a smile curved his lips, softening his features, making him look almost boyish. He could see the man now, beyond the palace gate, racing across the cobbles, carrying a dirty sheepskin. One hundred yards behind him, a man in bronze scales and helmet and a scarlet cloak was chasing him.

The man turned in at the palace garden gate. An instant later the unbolted wooden door swung inward. A curly black head was thrust through, and Solomon could see the head swing back and forth rapidly as bright eyes searched the marble benches and flagstones of the grounds.

Then the man was slipping through and running along a path. A moment later, he ducked down out of sight behind a flowering Egyptian privet hedge.

Solomon laughed softly under his breath. "Come, Benajah! The man plays you for a fool!" he whispered.

The man in the red cloak was out of sight now, hidden by the ten-foot palace wall. There was a moment of silence, in which Solomon could picture Benajah standing big and confident in his armor and red cloak, listening for a betraying sound.

"Yahweh forgive me. I can't stand here and only play the spectator!" he cried.

He whirled and ran across the flat palace rooftop, then down the stone staircase that was joined to the outer wall of the long building. Like most buildings of the city, this palace of David was fashioned of one story, fenced around with marble pillars, and flanked by a garden, a granary courtyard, and a long row of servant quarters. The cooking rooms, fitted with great brick ovens, flanked the chariot shelters, while beyond them were the stalls for the horses, covered over by wooden beams. It was the stable that Solomon had in sight as he came leaping from the stone steps and toward the gardens.

In the palace armory, half a hundred swords and daggers hung in ornate scabbards, but he ignored this fact. The man who fled from Benajah was unarmed except for a short Cretan dirk at his girdle, and Solomon was confident that his young strength could deal with that.

The gardens lay eastward from the palace buildings. He slowed his headlong run when he reached the privet bushes that hedged the flagstone paths. He sauntered now, humming faintly, eying the crescent moon which could be glimpsed between the leaves of a towering palm. Now he crouched below his elbow.

Solomon whirled. His great hands went out and down, closing tightly on a woolen tunic of Saban weave. The man came lunging up at him. Solomon caught the silver flash of moonlight on bared bronze. His hands on the woolen tunic shifted. They stabbed out and sideways, catching the man by his wrists and bending them outward.

The Cretan was strong. He was a stocky man, and his shoulders were almost a yard wide. Solomon grinned, and bent his own wide shoulders to the task before him. Silently he blessed the shepherd heritage of David, which had thewed his long legs and arms so heavily. Sweating, face to face with two glittering eyes that promised him death if his grip should weaken, he fought to bring those arms together.

The night was silent all around them. It was cool, for it was early spring in Israel, and the warm *shamsin* winds that would come with summertime from the Syrian desert and the East were as yet unborn. A lyre thrummed faintly from the women's quarters, where Anohbet would be stretched languidly on her cushions, listening to her girl musicians, and being homesick for the Nile and the red cliffs of Thebes.

The Cretan cursed hotly, writhing. Slowly this big dark man before him was bringing his wrists closer and closer. What startled Rhynthos most was the fact that the dark man was enjoying this. Intense pleasure showed in his feverish black eyes and smiling lips above the small, trimmed black beard.

"Herakles was no stronger!" Rhynthos panted, and his strength gave way.

He fell to his knees and the dagger dropped from his numb fingers. Instantly the dark man put out a sandaled foot to pin the bronze dirk to a flagstone.

"Be easy, Knossian," said Solomon. "Only tell me this: Why was Benajah chasing you?"

"The army captain? The man in the red cloak?"

Solomon nodded. "He is Benajah, the commander of Israel's army."

Rhynthos groaned. "That such a thing should happen to me now! Just when I was on the point of success, to run afoul of a man with influence!"

Solomon grinned. "Perhaps I could help you. I have—ah—certain influence myself, with Benajah. What'd you do to him?"

The Cretan considered this tall young man—a pampered fop, to judge by the perfumed black curls and expensive garments he wore –and shrugged. He could be no worse off by showing his treasure to this one. On hands and knees he crept back under the privet bush and brought out the sheepskin.

Almost reverently, he unrolled it.

Solomon paled, staring.

His hand went out and closed over the bow and lifted it up into the moonlight. Never before had there been such a weapon in all Israel! It was not made as Philistine bows were made, out of pliant ash, or as Egyptian bows were made, of red cedar, but was contrived from ibex horn and wood fitted together cunningly and shaped in a double curve. Unstrung, it was long and slim, like a twisted stick. Solomon could see that it would need a strong man to set a string to its tips, but that springiness was the secret of its power.

Rhynthos said softly, "I did nothing to the soldier, young man. I was drinking in a tavern close by the Gate of Foreigners. This Benajah passed by and jostled my table. The sheepskin unrolled and showed him the bow."

"Yes, yes. He would know its worth, once his eyes beheld it."

The Cretan was curious. Head cocked on a shoulder, he stared at the tall man. "Tell me, young master, how is it you can recognize its value? A soldier, yes. But a—"

He hesitated and Solomon laughed. "You were about to say a fop, eh? A pampered fribble?"

Rhynthos laughed boisterously in his nervousness. "Since you say so, I'll agree. How do you know what a miracle this thing is?"

"The Philistines slaughtered my people years ago, when Saul was king, by their archery. Only when David came to the throne and hired Hittite archers and Phoenician slingers was he able to defeat them. This bow, though, can outshoot anything the Philistines use. How far can it shoot?"

"More than six hundred and fifty strides of a tall man, master."

"Over six hundred yards!" whistled Solomon, somewhat shocked.

Solomon turned the bow over. He held the mastery of the world in his hands with this weapon. Trained archers could kill any opponent he sent them against by dropping them in their tracks long before they came close enough to use their own bows. Even the dreaded chariot charge would no longer be a fearsome weapon, against archers thus equipped. His breath grew short as his eyes grew brighter.

"Six hundred yards," he whispered, awed. "Where did you get it, Cretan?"

Rhynthos hooted. "That's my secret! All my life I've hunted this bow, without knowing what it was I sought. Somewhere in the world there was a treasure for me. My own personal treasure, just waiting to be found. Well, I've found it now. What would Hiram of Tyre give for that bow? Or mighty Pharoah of mighty Egypt? With this horn and wood thing, Simon could regain the old power of the Two Kingdoms when Thutmose the Third and Rameses the Second were alive!"

The bowman was the artilleryman of his day. In ranks of twos or three, and protected by towering hide shields, bowmen were stationed on the nearest hillside above a battleground. Their whistling shafts could seat and unseat kings. Properly commanded, they could win a man the world.

"What do you want for it?"

Rhynthos chuckled and put out a hand for his weapon. "Nothing from you, gracious master. You could not afford the precious stones and the gold and the delicate women that are my price. Only a king like Hiram or Siamon, or perhaps Nabu-mukin-apli, who rules at Babylon, could pay."

He leaned forward, growing more confidential. "How many nights have I shivered with cold, on the deck of a vessel caught in a storm on the Great Sea? Aye, and like to froze to death when the rain stopped and the cold set

in! How often has my skin bled when a desert sandstorm whipped up out of Parthia? Have you ever walked a hundred miles in the sun of Persia? Your sweat runs out like the waters of a wellspring from the rock! What price can pay for shivering spirits and bleeding flesh and sweating skin?"

The garden gate slammed open.

Benajah stood like a brazen image in his armor and helmet, framed by the draping folds of his scarlet cloak. His sword was naked in his right hand. The thick red folds of the cape were twisted about his left forearm.

Rhynthos gasped and whirled on a heel. Solomon stabbed at him with a hand, gripping his wrist and holding him as its mooring chain holds a river boat.

"Master! Gracious master, it is the army captain! The man you name commander of the Israelite armies! Let me go, I beg. I will send you the largest emerald Hiram or Siamon gives me, in exchange for —"

"Be quiet!" said Solomon, and there was something in his voice that froze the Cretan.

Benajah grinned and slipped his sword into its scabbard. Carefully he came across the walks of the garden and knelt before his king.

The Cretan almost fainted as Benajah said, "Your Majesty, the man at your elbow has a bow —"

"Oh, get up, Benajah," said Solomon, and he tossed the bow into his hands. With a grin, Solomon released Rhynthos. "Well, Cretan? Now you know my name, name me your price."

Rhynthos cowered, shaking in his terror. What was it he had called this young ruler? Fop! Great Zeus, his skin would be flayed from his belly! And—and perfumed fribble? "Aphrodite of the hungry loins! Greek sister of Astarte! Help me!"

"Stop moaning," Solomon told him, and laughed.

Benajah was young to be commander of the armies of

King Solomon. Only a decade older than his king, he had come out of the desert country of Kabzeel when little more than a boy to join the army of David. In the years between the first time he had put a bullhide shield on his arm until now, when a cloak of red Tyrian weave sat his shoulders, he had built a reputation for ability that was matched only by his reputation for personal bravery.

It had been Benajah that had performed prodigies with a bronze sword in the Moabite war, Benajah that had fought and killed a lion by himself. In hand-to-hand conflict he had slain an Egyptian spearman by yanking his own spear from him and then running it into his chest. Not quite so tall as Solomon, he was thickset and heavily muscled. His love of fighting was equaled by his love for foreign wines, and by the frequency with which he took women.

Benajah stared hard at the trembling Cretan. "Can you make more of these bows? How many can you turn out in a month?"

Rhynthos shivered steadily. "Gracious masters, I did not make the bow. It was not my fingers that fashioned it so cunningly. I had it of—" He broke off and stood mute, staring at the flagstoned walk beneath his rope sandals.

Benajah looked at Solomon. "We could torture him," he suggested.

"Benajah, you think with your sword arm. I've been speaking with my friend. All he wants is wealth. Wealth and ease and comfort, and a few women to make him happy of nights." Solomon chuckled. "He's been burned by sea spray and desert sun and wind. Now he wants to rest. Well, why shouldn't he? Besides, I think I know where he got the bow, anyhow."

Rhynthos gawked, his jaw dropping open. Tales had seeped out of Jerusalem about the wisdom of this young king. Men said he was in league with the jinn, and that his hands were more used to performing magical incanta-

tions than they were to offering sacrifice to Yahweh. That was a slander, Rhynthos guessed shrewdly. This tall young man was wise with an innate cleverness, not with magic.

Solomon gestured at the rope sandals that Rhynthos wore. "See his footgear, Benajah. They are Greek by their styling, but the new ropes that strengthen them are of Saban cut. His girdle, too, is Greek, and old and worn. But his cloak is the kind the Saban traders wear when they come up the coast of the Red Sea in their caravans. Our friend has been in Saba recently. Perhaps it was in that country that he bought or stole the bow."

Rhynthos babbled oaths to Zeus.

Solomon swung on him. "I'll give you a casket of uncut diamonds for your secret, Cretan. And a house by the Gate of the Strong Stairs, with any ten women you pick from the slave mart in old Salem. I'll fill the house with furniture and commission you in charge of my arsenal, with a yearly stipend of a thousand silver shekels. Now tell me the name of the man who made the bow and where I can find him!"

This was not the reward of which he had dreamed, but it would make Rhynthos the Cretan a very rich man, and Solomon had said he could pick out the ten women himself. He was secretly afraid that the new house would wear on his nerves after a year or two, for he was used to traveling, but he could always sell the house and the women slaves, and go back to his journeys. Besides, a coffer of uncut diamonds was a fabulous gift!

And so Rhynthos stuttered in his eagerness to reveal his secret. "I had the bow from a weaponmaker in a little shop close by the Well of Arish in the city of Saba."

"In Sheba," breathed Benajah, giving the city its Israelitic name.

Solomon drew a deep breath. His eyes ran over the white walls of the palace of David, which had been his home since he had been born, somewhat less than thirty

years before. Someday he would build himself a fine new palace, close by the great Temple, but that day was not yet come. Besides, he would need to have peace upon the land before he could begin building in comfort. That peace could be maintained by a thousand bows such as this, in the hands of trained archers. With such bowmen at his call, he need fear neither Tyre nor Egypt, Assyria to the northeast nor Babylon beyond the red desert.

His hand opened slowly, then closed tightly into a fist. "Benajah, I must have bows like this one. Many bows!"

"What man could we trust to go to Sheba and bring them back to you? What man would be loyal to Solomon when he had such a fortune in his hands?"

"I would trust Benajah the Kabzeelite," said Solomon slowly, regarding his chief captain with bright eyes. "Especially would I trust him were I to ride at his elbow."

Benajah started. "You would ride with your army to Sheba?"

"Not with my army. By myself, with you to befriend me in case of trouble. Hai! Just the two of us, alone against the world Do you realize I've hardly been out of Jerusalem in my life, except for a boyhood trip to Tyre, and when I visited Egypt to escort Anohbet to Israel?" He took to striding up and down the flagstoned walk. "I grow sick with boredom in the palace. I'm a young man still. I need excitement to keep from going mad!"

"Nathan would prevent it," growled Benajah, feeling excitement pulse in his own veins. "He would never let you go."

"I will handle Nathan," said Solomon softly.

He did not add that he was not quite so confident as he sounded. Nathan the prophet was like an eagle in his predatory fierceness. It was Nathan that had dared to chide David for carrying on with Bathsheba and for ordering her husband, Uriah, to the battle van in the fight with the Arameans, so that he would be killed. Nathan

forbade David to build the Temple, even though he had collected gold and silver and precious woods for that purpose, during the last years of his life. There was an intensity about Nathan that frightened a man, especially when one remembered that he was a prophet of Yahweh.

Nathan would forbid him to leave the city, declaring him a fool and an incompetent. But he would find a way to deal with him. He must! Remembering his earlier restlessness and his sense of inner frustration, he told himself this, coldly and calmly.

Aloud he said, "Take the Cretan to your home and make him welcome, as an honored guest. Take the bow, too, and put it in the armory that opens off the central hall of the palace. Bring horses to the palace gate at dawn. I will be ready then to ride with you."

Turning to Rhynthos, he said, "Before I leave, I will instruct my treasurers to pay you everything I promised. Select a fitting home and the ten slave women. My coffers will pay for them. The diamonds will be delivered to you in the morning."

Rhynthos bowed low, babbling his thanks, but Solomon was not listening. He was whirling on a heel and striding along the garden walk toward the pillared portico of the palace. Inside him, he was a maelstrom of emotions. He knew elation at this chance to leave Jerusalem and see something of the world with his own two eyes. Yet fear overlaid his joy with a cold, damp pall. Nathan would refuse permission, and Solomon did not know whether he was strong-willed enough to defy the old prophet.

He told himself, as he walked, that he must think as a king first and as a man last. A proper king concerns himself with his subjects and their safety. While such a bow as that horn-and-wood thing existed, Jerusalem would never be safe unless a thousand of them rested in his own arsenals. The fact that he welcomed this chance to go traveling and see new sights and learn new things was

secondary. But he could not smother that faint stirring of guilt inside him. This journey to far Sheba should be a distasteful chore, not a delight to be eagerly tasted, like a rare viand on the feasting table.

The palace was quiet as he passed between the marble pillars and into the corridor that flanked the central hall. Faintly, from the women's quarters, he could hear the rhythmical twanging of a six-stringed lyre.

He had intended seeking Nathan at once, but the music made him change his mind. He altered his walk so that he headed for the wide curtained doorway that gave entrance into the sleeping chambers of Anohbet, his Egyptian wife.

The thrumming lyre grew louder as Solomon walked between the brazen urns that lined the cedar pillars of his audience hall. A dozen brass tripod lamps sputtered softly, throwing a yellowish radiance over the red cedarwood ceiling beams and the white stone walls that were decorated with enameled brick and painted stucco. To the right were his own quarters, where he kept the precious papyrus rolls and clay tablets on which were recorded the details of his army and his wealth, and the matters that had to do with the building of the Temple. Ahead of him Anohbet would be lolling amid her cushions, listening to the girl harpist.

Benajah would take the Greek with him, and return with two fast Egyptian riding stallions. He would fetch traveling clothes, as well: plain garments that would hide the identity of the two men traveling south and east toward Ezion-Geber and the Red Sea. And Benajah would hide the bow in the armory. That was most important, hiding the bow. None must see it, none must speak of it, until he could distribute a thousand of them among his archers.

Solomon came to the curtained entrance to the women's quarters.

With a hand on the tasseled edge of the rich Assyrian drapery, he paused. A little flame of wanting burned in him tonight. His eyes hungered for the smooth coppery flesh of his wife. His palms itched to stroke her loins and caress the fullness of her bosom. He wanted nothing so much as to plunge himself into her beauty, and lose the cares that bestrode his every day as the colossus of Rhodes straddled its harbor.

Am I a king in the bedchamber, as I am king in Jerusalem? he asked himself. I am like an impoverished beggar seeking alms along the street of potters, where my wife is concerned.

There were women in Jerusalem who would consider it an honor to come to the royal couch. Plump Edomites with thighs that shook as they walked, lean Phrygians with skilled hands and fingers to make a man cry out with the pleasure of their strokings, harlots from Knossos and temple girls from Ephesus—all there were available to the King of Israel. He wanted none of them. It was this brown daughter of the pharoahs that he wanted this night, lovely Anohbet of the cold eyes and colder spirit, who treated him worse than he treated the meanest servant in his household.

Angrily he swept back the hangings and went striding past the golden incense burners that flanked the stone doorway of the women's quarters.

Anohbet cried out at sight of him. She was sprawled gracefully on thick cushions, one leg exposed from hip to golden anklet, where her sheer linen tunic was caught on a cushion tassel. Her brown eyes were enhanced by green malachite on her eyelids, and the natural redness of her ripe mouth was heavily stained with henna. The golden collar at her throat was her only ornament above the waist; except for that and the thin linen tunic, she was naked. For a moment she seemed to pose there for his hot eyes, as if to tempt him, he thought angrily, into

some rashness. Then she lazily reached out a hand and drew a thin cloak of yellow wool from the low ebony table beside the divan and threw it over herself.

"My husband comes to listen to Tiy and her lyre?"

Mockery lay in her cultured voice. Anohbet never let him forget that he was king only of a petty kingdom between the Phoenician world to the north and the Arabian kingdoms of the south. She was the daughter of Pharoah, a royal Egyptian, descendant of the pyramid builders. Her people were the mightiest in the world. At one time, before Moses brought them out of Egypt and into this land of Canaan, his people had been slaves of her ancestors.

She put her head back on the cushions and stared sightlessly up at the beamed ceiling. Her mouth smiled lazily, conveying to him her indifference. As his gaze slid from her bare shoulders to her naked little feet—she had put red henna on her toes and curving soles, he noticed—the thick anger in him slid away before the swollen hunger of his senses.

His hand gestured at the staring lyre girl, but the girl only turned toward Anohbet, whispering, "Shall I leave, mistress?"

Solomon was like the lightning in his rage. He leaped at the slave girl, bending and lifting her by a soft arm, shaking her angrily. "Am I king in my own palace?" he roared. "Do the slaves of my wife put on her airs and humors?"

Anohbet lifted herself to a sitting position. "Go away, Tiy," she said softly.

The girl slid down before Solomon and rubbed her forehead against his sandals. Solomon flushed and drew his foot away. A little ashamed of his violent outburst, he said, "Leave us, girl!"

When her bare feet pattered into silence, Solomon came and seated himself on the low ebony stool. His grave eyes studied his queen, who sat facing him as if unaware that her yellow cloak had slipped down across her upper thighs,

and that only the transparent byssus shielded her breasts from his gaze.

"Why did you marry me, Anohbet?" Solomon asked softly.

"My father told me to marry you," she answered sweetly, smiling up at him. "He said you were an up-and-coming king, and that the wealth your father was storing up from his victories made you quite a catch."

"Never before did any pharoah allow his daughter to marry with a stranger. Never before has an Israelite king taken a foreigner as chief wife. It would be different if we loved each other."

Anohbet sank back onto the cushions. The thick black wig she wore over her head, shaved in the Egyptian tradition, was set with flowers of thin gold and enamelwork, with fine gold filigree and slim golden wires. Its jet tresses framed a face whose cheeks were reddened now with something more than cosmetics. "Love isn't for kings and queens. They are above such things."

"I'm not above it, and I'm a king," Solomon said softly, leaning forward.

"A king of a petty little nation like Israel," she laughed scornfully. "There are more men in Pharoah's army than there are in all your land."

"Not any more." Solomon smiled. "Once, when Rameses was ruler along the Nile, yes. Not now. In a test of strength, who would win, Israel or Egypt?"

Her fingers went to her wig hair, arranging it. "You talk foolishly. You buy your chariots and your horses from Egypt, don't you?"

"Only because they make the best chariots and breed the finest horses in the world. Because Egypt is so impoverished by a hundred wastrel pharoahs that they need my gold and my silver, and so they sell me war weapons! In Thutmos' time, he would have come with his army and his chariots to trample a strange king and his city into

bloody dust for daring to suggest marriage with his daughter. Egypt grows old. Israel is young!"

Anohbet laughed softly, tauntingly. "You tell yourself this, but you don't believe it, Solomon. You are just a little king over a little country, and deep in your heart you know it."

He came off the ebony footstool to rest beside her body on a knee. His hands went down and under the light woolen tunic, sliding along her thighs and up over her soft hips. There was anger in Solomon and a strange, fierce yearning, but this Egyptian woman was an enigma to him. He could solve the riddles that Hiram of Tyre sent him, and frame word puzzles that Hiram could not decipher, but when it came to his own wife, he was as helpless as a babe.

Anohbet writhed away from him easily, with a serpentine twist of her warm coppery body. Her laughter was like a blow in the face.

"Go to the slave market in Salem if you want a woman, Solomon. The daughter of the pharoahs is not for you!"

"I want only you, Anohbet." He smiled coldly.

She would not escape him now, he told himself. His large hands tightened on her waist, lifting her and swinging her sideways across his knees. Her thin black brows drew close in haughty pride. She will not even grow angry at me, he told himself sickly. She considers me less than the rugs on which she walks!

With a spate of fury, he drew her up to him, holding her softness against his chest. She was warm under the thin byssus, as warm as her land of Egypt. Perfumes from Zoan and Sinai were in her thick black hair and on her flesh. In his wild desire to stir this woman, to make her forget her nationality and her heritage, he shook her.

"I am your king, as I am king of every other living thing in Israel! I came here tonight because I am leaving Jerusalem for a little while. I thought I might find affection

here, find a voice to tell me I'll be missed when I'm gone. Instead I discover coldness and mockery!"

Staring down at her slumbrous eyes, he forgot his anger. His words trailed off into silence. That mouth so close to his own, so red and moist! These breasts that he could feel hard and swollen against his chest. The skin over which his hand slid, warm and smooth beneath the thin Egyptian linen!

He swept her up into his arms and kissed her savagely, betraying his need in the convulsive strut of his muscles. He was like the sandstorm that swept out the red desert between the Sea of Chinneroth and Elam, powerful and raging. Just for an instant, he imagined he felt a response to that inner tempest. Her perfumed arms seemed to tighten convulsively about his neck, and her soft lips parted tenderly.

Then she whispered to him, and his blood ran cold in his veins. "You forget that ours is a marriage of state, to join two kingdoms. There is no love between us. How can there be love between a man who worships one god and a woman who worships many?"

His arms loosened and she twisted free of him, to stand ten feet away, clutching the yellow woolen cloak about her brown shoulders, brooding at him from under long black lashes. There was a fire in this woman that showed itself in her bright eyes and red mouth, and in the brown skin that was smooth satin to the touch, warm and vibrant with life. The terrible heat of the Egyptian sun was in her blood, mixed with the cool green water of the great Nile, and the stark beauty of a desert oasis at the first rising of the evening stars.

"One god," she said softly. "A god named Yahweh. A tiny little god belonging to a tiny people out of the desert lands to the south!"

"There is only one God," replied Solomon hoarsely, trying to fight the anger in him. "Even one of your own

pharaohs—Akhenaten, who built a city in honor of this one God he knew as Aton—realized that."

"And what happened to Akhenaten?" she inquired sweetly. "When he died, the priests of the true gods became powerful once again. The priests of the great Osiris, lord of the Nile, lord of justice and truth and love! Of Set, the black god of evil and wickedness! Of Isis, goddess of love and all sweetness!"

Solomon snorted. Always he tried to avoid these quarrels with Anohbet, for they left him filled with bitterness in his heart toward her, who could become as ruthless as an Assyrian conqueror with the scalpel of her tongue, cutting and gouging him with words. He had proof of his rightness: Every living man and woman among his people knew the blinding power of the Ark and the God Who spoke through its priests. They were familiar with the story of the man who touched it when it was about to fall, even though this was specifically forbidden, and how Yahweh avenged his transgression by death. With his own ears he had heard the voice of Yahweh speaking to him, offering him the gift of wisdom. But how did a man go about telling such things to his wife, in such a manner that she would believe? Anohbet only looked at him steadily and let her wide mouth curve gently into a smile—the sort of smile he'd seen more than one mother bestow on a mischievous but beloved child.

Anohbet moved with swaying haunches toward a low cosmetic table that held a dozen clay jars and hematite vials of ointments and perfumes. Always she used her shapely body to taunt him in one way or another, as if calling her flesh to his attention in an unspoken promise that these loins and these slim legs would belong to him, once he came to his senses and acknowledged the sovereignty of Osiris and Isis.

As she rubbed a depilatory into the curve of an armpit, Anohbet said lazily, "You do not deny what I say, Solo-

mon. You are afraid to use reason against me. Is one man stronger than ten? Why should one god be stronger than ten gods?"

Fists clenched against the fury that made the veins throb at his temples, he said, "Yahweh is the true God! Those others are only names invented by superstitious men in forgotten times. Your Set, god of the dead, murdered Osiris, and dismembered him. While Osiris lay dead, the world also died. No crops grew. No flowers bloomed. Your Isis, who found the scattered pieces of his body, put them together and hid them in a tomb. Then, suddenly, the world sprang into life again. Buds blossomed. Trees put forth leaves where they had been barren and the world was green again!

"Can't you see? It's the sort of a story a priest in the long-ago times would have made up to explain the seasons. In those years when men depended so much on vegetables and vegetation, the coming of wintertime must have been a great hardship. They needed something to explain the dying crops in winter and their rebirth in the spring, and so their priests or shamans gave the story to them. With the centuries, it became a facet of your religion."

Anohbet was staring at him with overbright eyes. The woolen robe was forgotten, and lay pooled at her tiny brown feet. She's a goddess herself, Solomon thought helplessly, a goddess of beauty and love, dead as the world itself during the death of her Osiris. She needs someone to gather up the scattered pieces of her heart and restore them to her, so that she can be an entire woman, alive and warm and loving. She stood now breathing faster, so that the collarette of jewels that lay above her protruding breasts caught the lamplight in minute coruscations.

"Indeed? As simple as that? And how does the wise Solomon explain the fact that Egypt has a hundred temples greater than the single temple he built? Does that

seem to argue that your Yahweh is greater than Osiris or Amon-Ra or Anubis?"

"The fact that Egypt is an older nation than Israel means nothing. That its people are numerous, that conquerors like Rameses and Thutmose gave them millions of human beings to use for slave labor only prove Egypt's greatness as a military power and as a nation of builders."

Anohbet brought the black diorite jar with which she had been pouring unguents in a cupped palm down hard on the tabletop. Angrily she moved her ointment-wet palms across her soft skin. It was as if she were trying to show him the excitement and the wonder of her flesh, which he denied himself by his senseless —in her eyes— insistence on the single divinity of Yahweh to the exclusion of the ancient gods of Egypt.

For a moment Solomon watched her moving hands, aware that something deep within him yearned with a terrible strength toward this woman. But even stronger than this sensuality was the power of his will and spirit, which told him that Anohbet, for all her loveliness, was a temptress such as Hagar had been to Abraham. And Yahweh had made Abraham rid himself of Hagar, banishing her and her son, Ishmael, into the wilderness below Beersheba that was known as Paran. He did not want to lose Anohbet by surrendering his flesh and his spirit into her keeping. I want to keep her here with me, if only to feast my eyes on her satiny brown body, he thought, silently aware of a sick hunger inside him that made him angry at himself.

In that anger he strode from the divan to the curtained doorway, ripping apart the hangings with a single movement of an arm. Anohbet stood frozen, staring at him.

"Yahweh is the one true God," he cried fiercely. "Someday He will show me the way to open your eyes, so that you will believe in Him as I do!"

"I will always believe in Osiris and Isis, Solomon. As you pray to your Yahweh, I shall pray to my gods for your conversion to the faith of my fathers—for the wisdom that will open your eyes to the truth of Osiris and Horus and Isis."

For a moment Solomon glared at her. Then, with a shrug of his wide shoulders, he moved between the hangings and out through the stone doorway. He did not see the wide eyes of his Egyptian wife as they filled with tears, or the quiver of her ripe mouth. Her body seemed to shrink in upon itself. With a muffled moan she brought the woolen *khalak* to her eyes and wept softly.

None but Anohbet knew how she felt about this tall husband or hers. If he would only be as fierce in his love toward her as he was in his worship of his God, she would have been happy. She was too proud to yield before that worship, for she was a daughter of the pharoahs, and had been trained since infancy to the belief in Anubis and Horus. In her own mind there were no gods but Egyptian gods. All the rest were foreign, as the people who worshiped them were foreign. Nightly she offered tiny grains of incense before the little ebony-and-gold statue of Hathor, goddess of love, to supplicate that Solomon should see and agree with this reasoning.

And yet, despite all she did, he remained a stranger, loyal to his Yahweh. This thin byssus, through which his eyes could see the curves of her breasts and the pit of her navel, should have been enough to tempt him into surrendering. Aie, and the golden collar at her throat, and the musky perfumes her hands had worked into her skin before his gaze! Her eyes were bright, shaded heavily with green malachite on their lids. Her waist was slim, her legs were long and shapely. Couldn't he forget Yahweh for once and give in to her, worshiping Isis or Serapis or Ra, and so win this love she burned to feed him?

"He's a stubborn, arrogant fool! Blind! And strong!"

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"He's a stubborn, arrogant fool! Blind! And strong!"

A clay amphora stood on the ebony table close to Solomon. He put a hand on it and lifted it and threw it across the chamber so that it crashed and shattered on the wall.

"I am not a king. I am only a young man you've muttered prayers over, who has sacrificed and talked to Yahweh! Nobody obeys me, outside my soldiers. Not Anohbet. Not you. I am tired of playing at king to make you happy."

The phophet frowned heavily in the shadows. His people were not used to kings. Less than one hundred years before, Saul, who had been the gifted son of a rich Benjamite, was set up as their ruler by the prophet Samuel. After Saul had come David, who was a shepherd boy who got himself a reputation by killing that Philistine giant, Goliath. And now Solomon. There was no tradition of kingship here in Israel as there was in Egypt and in Babylon. It made it hard for him to know what to do.

Solomon was too tense. There was a flame in this one that Saul had never had. Even David had lacked this white inner heat that made Solomon stand out among men. He must go easily. It would not do to provoke Solomon to rashness. A little vacation might even be a good thing for him, if he conducted himself carefully.

Nathan said soothingly, "Benajah mentioned a bow, and a man from Crete."

Anger slid from Solomon's eyes before a gathering excitement as he came a step nearer the old man. "Such a bow as you've never seen! It can shoot more than six hundred yards!"

Nathan smiled. Young men were always so impetuous. David had been like this, many years ago. "Have you seen it shoot that far?"

"Well, no. But the Cretan seemed honest."

Nathan smiled faintly, and Solomon flushed. "You would travel south to Sheba, close to the watery rim of

the world, to find a man who made a bow you have not tested?"

Solomon drew himself up proudly. "I am a soldier. My people are soldiers. I know a good weapon!"

"No, no. The bow must be tested. It's the only way I'll hear of your leaving Jerusalem. Only if the bow does what you say it will."

Triumph bubbled inside Solomon, making him cry out harshly and strike his fist alongside the ebony table laden with the rolled scrolls that a servant had gathered up from the floor. He had been worried about Nathan. Since boyhood he had looked with awe upon the old prophet. Now in his young manhood, he still had not shaken that sense of dependence and remembered fear. For once, he would show Nathan that at least when it came to weapons, he was his superior.

"Come!" said Solomon, and he led the way out of the chamber and across the lamplit central hall to the brass-and-boxwood door of the armory. "Benajah put the bow safely away, before he took the Greek to his home."

The brazen door clanged open. In the torchlight they stared into a long room fitted with racks that held swords and axes, and racks from which hung the chain-mail armor of Philistia and the ring-mail tunics of Assyria. Hittite axes, long-handled and two-headed, reclined beside the horned Shardana helmets of Egyptian mercenaries. Shields hung by their straps from wall pegs: round and curved, of hide and wood and metal. From every corner of the world, these weapons were brought and tested, for Solomon in his wisdom knew that a nation can grow in peace only as long as its armies are strong enough to maintain it. Assyrian short bows were hung beside the longer Phoenician bows. Straight swords from Babylon and Greece were arranged over the curved falchions of Egypt.

Benajah had left the bow in its dirty sheepskin on a small table.

Solomon caught it up, stripped away the covering, and held it aloft so that Nathan could see and admire it. But the prophet was no man of war. To him it was much the same as the other bows he could see in the shadows.

Solomon glanced around. His eye lighted on a long Assyrian hauberk that was fashioned of interlocked metal plates sewn onto a leather tunic. He snatched it up and shook it.

"If I put an arrow through this mail at two hundred yards, Nathan—will you say I'm right, then?"

Nathan blinked. Man of God he was, but he was not blind to the efficacy of such a weapon. He had seen Saul and David march out in their battles against Philistines and Moabites, Ammonites and the kings of Zobah. In order that the Temple remain beautiful and unharmed, his people must be able to protect it. Silently he nodded.

They went out into the gardens. Nathan stood on the flaggings while Solomon went across the garden and set the hauberk up, hanging it on the branches of a frankincense tree.

With a hand and a leg, Solomon strung the bow. He had brought a Persian quiver with him, an ornate thing of decorated leather and strips of silver. He selected an arrow from it and nocked it to the string.

As Nathan watched, he drew the bow far back, until the arrow feathers brushed his ear. For an instant he held the bow like that, enjoying the tension in his muscles, feeling the wind touch his flushed face. Then he released the arrow.

It flew straight, humming. It went through the hauberk at the other end of the garden and on, until it broke against the hard brick wall behind it.

Nathan cried out hoarsely, staring.

Solomon smiled, and bent for another arrow. "That may have been an accident," he said softly. "I'll try again."

Three arrows he shot, as Nathan stared. Each of the three traveled through the metal hauberk as if those plates had been fashioned of leaves, rather than of brass, and broke in half on the wall behind it.

"Such a weapon might kill two men with one arrow, upon occasions," he pointed out to Nathan, and unstrung the bow.

"The powers of darkness must have made it!"

Solomon paused with the bow in one hand. "Why not say that Yahweh sent this Cretan to my palace tonight? It may be His will that we have many bows like this. If we had this bow, who would dare be so rash as to fight us?"

That made sense, Nathan agreed. Yahweh was not a god of war, but He would want His people to defend themselves against attack. Nathan said as much, as he walked back into the palace with Solomon. It was true that he did not want Solomon to leave Jerusalem, but it was equally true that he knew no one they could trust completely for such a task. Benajah could be trusted, but he was a blunt soldier, unskilled in the arts of bargaining and statesmanship. It was best, after all, that Solomon ride with Benajah southward into Sheba.

"I will pass along the news that you have gone to Tyre," he said thoughtfully, leaning heavily on his almondwood staff. "How soon can you be gone?"

"Before dawn comes up over the Valley of Cedron. We'll go out the Gate of Strangers, clad as foreigners. No one will imagine Solomon in the mercenary soldier he will see beside Benajah."

Jothab, who was an elder brother of King Solomon and the son of David and Ahinoam, let the ivory draughts piece fall from his fingers as he turned to stare at the servant who fawned before him, bowing low. Across the square sandalwood table that held the boxed draughts

board, his friend Nerkal the Assyrian reached for a goblet of thin Sidon glassware that was filled with white Arsinoite wine.

"Well, Nabal?" Jothab said to the servant. "What brings you through the night to my quarters? It must be something world-shattering for you so to visit Jothab the Unwanted."

Nabal smiled slyly. His black eyes glittered greedily. More than once in the past this brother of the king had rewarded him with gold pieces or small jewels for some especially succulent tidbit of palace gossip. The fact that Jothab managed to make a thousandfold profit on his news in the form of gifts or privileges did not matter to Nabal. It was enough that Jothab was generous with him.

"My news concerns the king, your brother, Highness. He is leaving Jerusalem for some city in Arabia called Sheba. I'd just finished cleaning his room—he'd knocked over a table and scattered some scrolls—when Nathan entered and bade me be gone. I waited outside in the corridor, and overheard the words they spoke. It had to do with a bow of some sort."

Jothab fumbled at his corded belt and undid the strings of a small purse. He tossed it through the air at the servant, who caught it expertly. "You did well, Nabal. If anything comes of this, you'll be rewarded even better."

The smiling Nabal babbled thanks and withdrew.

When he was gone, the Assyrian hunched foward. He wore his thick black hair in tight little ringlets, curled and scented, just as Jothab did. His richly fringed tunic, which was ornamented with embroidered flowers, reached to his sandaled feet. A long shawl was belted about his middle, while a second and smaller one, semicircular in shape, covered his shoulders. When he smiled, his teeth showed white and large.

"The man treats you like a king, Jothab, instead of an older brother of a king."

Jothab smiled too, with an upcurve of lip that showed an innate cruelty. "Solomon is not immortal. My brother Absalom failed in his revolt against David, my father, and was slain by Joab, when his hair became tangled in a tree. My brother Adonijah failed, too, and was slain at Solomon's orders."

"You will succeed, where they failed?"

"Solomon will be dead when I rebel, friend Nerkal, so you can see it will not be a revolt, strictly speaking. Solomon is my brother, but Bathsheba is his mother. My mother, Ahinoam, was wife to David before he ever saw Bathsheba. I am older than Solomon. What right has he to a throne that should be mine?"

The Assyrian reached out a languid hand to lift an orange from a silver platter. He began to peel it, saying, "Jothab, king of Jerusalem! It has a good sound to it. All you lack is a man to slip the steel between Solomon's ribs. Of course, such a man could just about name his own price for the deed, couldn't he?"

Nerkal dissected the fruit, and began slicing it with his belt dagger. "I would say that Sheba is the best place for Solomon to die. You can blame their queen. Her name is Balkis, by the way—a young thing who showed great promise, last time I was in her country. Black hair. Slanting black eyes. Skin like beaten cream."

Jothab chuckled. "It will be a political murder. This queen will be afraid that Solomon plans to conquer her. A good notion, Nerkal! Now can you advise me as to the man best fitted to commit it?"

Nerkal chewed a moment, then said, "I am a dealer in woolen stuffs and brocades. My business takes me to all corners of the world It would only be natural for me to go to Sheba, taking my camels with me. No one would be suspicious. Of course, my personal bodyguard—Ogoth of Miletus, you'll recall—will travel at my side."

"A professional soldier, I believe?" Jothab smiled.

"I rescued him from the flayer's knife in Erech, after he had killed a man over a tavern slut. He is grateful, and will do anything I tell him."

"I will be a very rich man when Solomon dies," said Jothab thoughtfully. "To someone who did me such a favor, I would prove extremely appreciative. I do not think ten thousand silver talents overmuch."

The Assyrian choked on the orange pulp. His black eyes brightened feverishly, then lidded over. "More than overmuch! Royally generous! So generous it makes me suspicious. I will write the terms of our bargain on a clay tablet that will be opened if I die. Only to protect myself, naturally."

Jothab laughed slyly. "When I pay the money to you, give me the clay tablet to be destroyed. In that way, we will be sure of one another."

Nerkal nodded. "Suppose one of Solomon's other brothers decides the throne belongs to him?"

"I have friends in Cana. I have made myself helpful to the people of Dothan and Shechem. In return for my continued friendship, they will put their armies at my disposal When Solomon dies, I will march into Jerusalem at their head. I will seize the throne before anyone can stop me. It will be very simple. Solomon and Benajah will be dead. Who will be left to command?"

Chapter Two

THE ROADSIDE INN of Ibram the Amalekite was a low structure of mud bricks and stone, close by the camel route that wound from Ashkelon in Philistia southeastward as far as the Red Sea port city of Ezion-Geber. Wineskins that bulged fat with white Mareotic, dark-yellow Taeniotic, and cheap red Thasian hung on pegs behind his wooden counter. Ripe Chaldean cheeses and bundles of succulent Syrian figs were ready to be served, with goat's milk and Egyptian beer and steaming slices of roast lamb, to the travelers that thronged the low walls of his khan.

The inn was almost empty, for it was between visits of the long camel caravans that carried the produce of Persis and Arabia north to the shores of the Inland Sea. Scarcely a dozen travelers sat by the little board tables he provided, or dozed in the darker shadows, warm with wine.

Ibram the Amalekite sat on a tall stool by the wineskins, where he could fill the leather cups the serving women brought him from the tables. It was almost time for Ramah to dance, but the pickings would be small this night. None of the guests seemed able to afford even a copper bit for her body.

For the fifth time in as many minutes, his eyes came back to the two tall men who ate so voraciously in the darkest shadows. Because of the long cloaks they wore, covering them from sandaled ankles to their necks, he could see but little of their garb. They looked like soldiers, for they were lean and heavily muscled, both of them, and the tips of long scabbards peeped out from under the folds of their cloaks.

Ibram sighed. Perhaps they might have a few silver shekels to pay sultry Ramah for something more than the interesting belly dance she did in the cleared space between the tables and the counter.

Solomon felt eyes on his and looked up, seeing the speculation and the greed in the face of the oily Amalekite. He and Benajah had come far this day, almost seventy miles from Jerusalem to the edge of the wilderness of Zin, where this tavern was located, but there was no weariness in him. He was too full of living, enjoying this moment. For the first time in his life, he was on his own. There were no tutors to caution him, no elders to advise his actions, no Nathan to admonish him.

The greed and speculation in those eyes touched a warning signal in his mind, but he only smiled agreeably. If the innkeeper chose to consider him a victim of a nighttime robbery, he would welcome the chance to test the sword at his side. It was a good weapon, fashioned of tempered iron and made by an Achaean smith reputed to be the finest weaponmaker in all Greece.

He mentioned his suspicions to Benajah in a low whisper, but the captain only laughed and shook his head.

"Ibram makes too much money selling wine and food to the caravans to bother about two dusty riders. I've been here before. It's almost time for Ramah to appear. Ibram's only wondering if we're going to pay good silver to enjoy her."

Solomon felt his heart thud faster. "Ramah?"

"A Midianite woman. A dancer." Benajah grinned, watching Solomon slyly. "You've never seen anything like her. I've heard she's a runaway priestess of Astarte."

Solomon blinked. Rumors of the lewd goddess Astarte had seeped into the palace at Jerusalem. Slave girls and merchants whispered things about her worship, when Solomon could free himself of Nathan or Zadok, who was high priest in the Temple and another of his countless

advisers, long enough to enjoy a few moments' conversation alone with them.

Faintly the tinkling clash of a sistrum came to their ears: rhythmical, but somehow disturbing. The gentle throb of a hide drum echoed its beat.

Solomon sat straighter, the blood pounding in his temples. For all his life, he had been sheltered. Now he was without any protection against the world and its greeds, other than his sword arm and that of Benajah the Kabzeelite. It was a good feeling, a manly feeling, and Solomon relished it.

A tasseled curtain parted and Ramah slid out into the room.

At the same moment, the wooden door opened and two men entered. Only Ibram saw the men, for he had seen Ramah a thousand times before, and while his eyes still enjoyed her dancing, these newcomers meant fresh coins in his money pots. One of the men was tall, with a black, curling beard and hair that clustered in ringlets on his bare head. The other man was shorter and stockier, with the scars of old wounds on cheek and forearm. Ibram tabbed him as a professional soldier, tough and heartless, whose leather pouch bulged with blood money.

Blood money or trade coins, silver was all the same to the Amalekite. He clapped his palms and bade two serving women attend the newcomers. Before he turned back to watch Ramah, Ibram noticed how the stockier of the strangers stared hard at the two cloaked men in the dark shadows. The mercenary had no eyes for the twisting Midianite woman. All he saw was Solomon, and his eyes glistened as if they saw him as a hill of coins that would make him a rich man.

Solomon and Benajah saw nothing but the woman.

She poised a moment before the tasseled curtain, a brocaded hanging from Nineveh. Her slim arms made a circle from her shoulders to the tips of her ringed fingers,

meeting above her head. All she wore was a black linen apron, hung low on her loins, and a festoon of necklaces about her throat. Henna paste had been used to redden her pouting lips and the tips of her breasts, her knees, and the soles of her feet. Black hair hung to the middle of her naked back.

She swung her hips lazily from side to side, slowly increasing the speed of the motion. A slim leg came forward and then she was walking on the tips of her reddened toes, palms together above her head, her slanting eyes sliding to this man and that, bright and mocking. Twice she circled the room before she paused in the pool of light from an oil cresset and brought her arms down to her sides.

Now Ramah began to dance as the priestesses of Astarte danced when they worshipped the goddess in the temples of Tyre and Ashur, Babylon and Ephesus. Solomon stared, his mouth open a little, the wine and this woman combining to put a sheen of sweat on his brow. For a moment he remembered Nathan, and David his father and Bathsheba his mother, but Jerusalem was far away and he was a man without a name, with only a sword for protection.

The Midianite woman made the black linen apron lift in the convulsions of her middle, sending it flying upward to the accompaniment of shrill laughter. These two young men in the rich cloaks—she had seen woolenware like that in Kish, and knew how expensive it was—were wealthy. They made no pretense of their riches, and did not boast of grain fields and fat kine, but Ramah knew it was these quiet ones whose purses bulged the fattest with the heaviest coins. Only a few more handfuls of silver shekels or golden drachmas in her coffers in her tiny room, and she could return to Midian a rich woman.

She made herself ripple in tiny waves from her shoulders downward. Her eyes remained longest on the younger of the two men, the one with the bright black eyes and full

mouth. There was something almost regal in his look. The other was used to command, however. She had known Chaldean warriors with that same air; and besides, he had been here before. Her body remembered him.

With a harsh cry, Ramah tore the little apron loose and threw it at the table where the two men sat entranced. For an instant she stood there proudly, letting them stare; then she was running over the stone floor of the tavern for the shelter of the tasseled curtain.

The black apron lay on the table between Solomon and Benajah.

"Take it, Solomon," whispered his captain hoarsely. "It is an invitation to join her in her room for a cup of wine. It will cost you a few silver pieces, but you'll never forget the experience."

Solomon was remembering his father and mother, and the heritage of sin that was in him. His blood demanded that Ramah soothe the fever she had created, but his mind was cold and logical. He was king of Jerusalem, on his way to Sheba to find a man who made the most powerful bows in the world. Succeed in that, and he could buy a dozen such dancers as this Midianite woman!

"No," he murmured, even as he cursed the cold core of logic inside him.

Benajah put a hand on the thin black apron. Slowly his powerful fingers crumpled it until it was almost hidden in his palm. "Take it, or let me go in your place!"

"Go, then! I'll wait for you in our sleeping quarters."

Benajah stood up, breathing deeply. It was his duty to remain with young Solomon in case of danger, but what danger was there for the King of Israel in a roadside khan? The black apron was soft and scented between his fingers; as soft and as scented as Ramah herself. With a soft harsh cry he buried his face in the black linen, breathing deeply; then he was running for the tasseled curtain, leaving Solomon staring after him.

Voices cut into the silence, demanding red wine. Serving women were being pulled down onto laps as hard hands sought out the hidden flesh of their bodies Shrill laughter rose up into the smoky air of the inn. Ibram grinned widely from his high stool beside the wine counter. This was a small crowd, but Ramah had outdone herself this night. Never had she danced with quite so much abandon. The customers were beginning to forget themselves, and when men forgot themselves, their purse strings opened.

Ibram came down off the stool and went to fetch the wineskins himself. The travelers were too busy with the women to permit them to leave in order to fill their goblets. Ibram would do that, and present his reckoning in the morning. It looked like a good night, after all.

Solomon stood up and shook himself. The wine was in his blood, churning madly. He needed fresh air and his sleeping cloak. He pushed open the tavern door and went out into the night.

Nerkal the Assyrian watched him go, smiling coldly, running his fingers through the perfumed black hair of his beard. They could go after Solomon now, when all the tavern was busy, and slay him. That was what Ogoth wanted to do, but Ogoth was an animal, without a brain in his head.

"If we slay him here, men will know who did it," he explained. "Benajah will search us out and slay us, and I've a mind to enjoy the reward that Jothab promised."

Ogoth growled, "Jothab will protect us."

Nerkal grinned mirthlessly. "Will he? Or will it suit his purpose to tear out our tongues so that we cannot tell what happened between the brother of Solomon and his slayers, and then turn us over to Benajah for punishment? No, no! There is a better way. If Solomon gets to Sheba, and dies there with Benajah, who can ever accuse us of his death?"

Ogoth scowled blackly. It took a long time for Ogoth to marshal his thoughts, for he was a fighting man, not used to thinking. "Even if we do kill Solomon, what's to prevent Jothab from doing the same thing to us then?"

"There will be no need to do that. I will take my reward and go back to Haran, where I was born, and live like a royal governor. You will return to Miletus, as you have told me you long to do."

"Yes, I will do that. But won't Jothab try to kill us anyhow, to prevent our telling what happened?"

Nerkal laughed. "I have already caused a clay tablet with the whole story to be sent to Haran, to my brother, to be broken open when word comes to him of my death. Jothab knows of it. He will not be anxious to be pointed out as a murderer." He reached for the wooden noggin of red Thasian wine and finished it in a swallow. "Leave the brainwork to me, Ogoth. You keep your sword sharp for the killing. Come now, call the tavernkeeper here. Let's see if he has any other wenches running around the place. We might as well enjoy ourselves while we're at it."

Ogoth frowned darkly and put a hand on his sword hilt. "You go with the wench! I'll sharpen my sword and wait for you."

The Assyrian shrugged and shouted to Ibram that he wanted a small wineskin and a woman to bring to his quarters. He felt a little sorry for Ogoth. The man was made only for killing his fellow men. He had no worldliness, as Nerkal had.

At Ezion-Geber, Solomon and Benajah took passage on a clumsy Red Sea boat whose timbers were supported by running ropes. Its big sail flapped lazily from its mainmast most of the time, so it had to be rowed by brawny slaves. Toward sunset of their first day at sea, a sleek Phoenician river boat went slicing past on a southerly tack At the high, curving wooden prow, which was painted

in reds and pinks to simulate the figure of the god Ut-Napishtim, who the Phoenicians believed ruled the sea waves and the ocean winds, stood two men whom Solomon had seen before.

"They were at the inn of Ibram the Amalekite," he said to Benajah. "An Assyrian and a soldier, who is his bodyguard. See how much better time they make than we do."

Benajah was soothing. "Passage in such a ship costs many silver shekels Besides, you and I are acting the part of soldiers of fortune. Should we waste silver when we can pay with copper, you and I?"

Solomon grumbled a little, under his breath. It was all very well to play the mime, and act out this part, for which he dressed in a crude woolen cloak and a cotton tunic with a panther skin over it, but he was a king, and used only to the finest things. Benajah laughed a little at his scowl and told him that someday he would look back on all this and consider it the finest part of his life.

"You've been so busy being a king, you've had no time to be a man." He smiled. "This experience is good for you. It'll teach you how most of your subjects live, how they eat and drink and enjoy themselves."

Solomon blinked. Intuitively, he recognized the truth of what Benajah said. His eyes stared down the single deck of the little ship, picking out the tightly roped bales of a seller of Egyptian linens and the gracefully enameled jars of a coppersmith. That slim woman yonder, with the fringed edge of her scarf drawn over her head—was she harlot or holy woman? The bearded man who leaned beside the tiller, scowling at the blue mountains rising from the low shoreline—did he sell human beings or pottery? There was so much to learn about the world, and he had so little time in which to do it. One lifetime was like a single turn of a water clock's wheel against the larger background of the day.

He stirred restlessly, remembering Ramah. He had been

so busy being a king all his life, he had had no time to be a man! That was what Benajah said. What he meant was that he should have taken the Midianite woman the other night, and forgotten that he was on a state journey. Oh, he had had women; at first in adolescent curiosity, then from an inner need. Few of them made any impression on him, outside of Anohbet. His pulse beat faster as he remembered her coppery skin beneath the transparent linen tunics she wore. As smooth as Paros marble, and warm with life!

"The Midianite woman, Benajah—was she as lovely in the dark as she was in the tavern lamplight?"

Benajah hooted. "In the dark? She had five wax tapers burning and a brass bowl filled with smoking incense! I didn't sleep a minute of all the time I was gone from you. No wonder I was so tired next day. Even thinking about it makes me weary."

He was almost smacking his lips, Solomon thought glumly. What was it about some women that could do this to a man? He had never yet met such a woman, unless he counted Anohbet as he pictured her to himself sometimes, in his imagination.

Benajah leaned closer, eyes bright. "You are wise, Solomon. Gossip has it that the Lord so blessed you, when you sacrificed to Him at Gibeon. Yet you know so little of women! Be a man, and not only a king, in Sheba. Perhaps you'll learn another kind of wisdom if you are!"

From the mountains to larboard came the soft warm winds of inner Arabia, fanning his flushed cheeks, bellying out the big sail so that it strained against its rigging ropes. The oarsmen were relaxing with grateful groans. They were moving past the steppeland of Petraea here, toward the hilly country of Ophir, where ships from Persis and faraway India docked, to bring rare furs and metalware, fine weapons and exotic foods to the markets of Egypt and Israel. It was a strange new world into which he was trav-

eling, Solomon thought, where anything might happen.

Benajah grunted and wrapped his cloak more tightly about his wide shoulders "I'm going to doze a little, by the scuppers. Remember what I said. Promise yourself that the first foreign woman who appeals to you in Sheba you'll take and enjoy. Maybe she'll teach you that being a man can be as much fun, sometimes, as being a king."

They moved side by side through the crowded market square of the city of Sheba. They were tall men, Solomon and Benajah, and their faces were tanned by sun and wind. In fur pelisses and long woolen cloaks, with their long swords at their brass-studded belts, they seemed in truth the wandering adventurers they pretended to be. Their bright eyes moved this way and that, studying the lean brown men of Sheba, and the foreigners: white hillmen out of Saphar, and dark-brown traders from Punt, who dealt in black slaves; pearl sellers from the blue bay waters of Oman, squatting beside their shallow wicker baskets, singing the praises of their jewels; tall Scenitae tribesmen resting on rich rugs close by fine Najd stallions they had brought out of their desert sands to sell.

It was a living world all around him, a part of that larger world Solomon had seen on maps drawn by Phoenician traders. Solomon knew that the earth was bounded on the west by the Pillars of Herakles and on the east by a great stretch of land that lay beyond Bokhara, but how far it extended no man could say. To the south, far off, was India, where men worshiped strange gods and built tiered temples. No one knew much of the Africa that lay below Meroe. There were Egyptian metal mines somewhere in its interior, it was rumored, but the Egyptians were a close-mouthed race, and did not spread information about their possessions. To the north, behind the cities of Greece, were only vast forests and wild savages, and Scythia.

Here in Sheba these lands were meeting through their seafaring traders. As he studied swaggering sailors and taciturn desert men, Solomon regretted briefly that his people were so unfamiliar with the sea. The ocean waves touched all shores. They could carry rice from Gedrosia and raw iron from Lagash, gaily painted potteries from Persis and grain from the Nile delta to the selling blocks of Jerusalem. Healthy trade and an exchange of produce and ideas kept a nation rich and prosperous. He would put some of his stored wealth into ships, and into hired Phoenician sailors, that his people might also enjoy the benefits of rubbing elbows with the world.

Benajah was more concerned with sleep than he was with trade. He struck up a conversation with a man hunkered down beside a skin stretched fat with milk and hung from a tripod. The man was swinging the skin gently, making the milk inside it churn itself, so that when he opened the hide, he would have creamy butter to sell From the tradesman, Benajah learned of a small hostelry on the Street of Wine Merchants, where travelers from far lands might find rope beds and an occasional bowl of porridge.

"We'll hire a room, then go hunting this maker of bows in the morning," the captain said, shouldering a path between a girl carrying an earthenware water jar on a shoulder and a drunken sailor.

Solomon was eager to be about his business. He protested, "Find the bowmaker first and then a place to sleep."

Benajah grinned and waved a hand at the brick buildings towering high on all sides of them. This was a heterogeneous city, this Sheba. The overhanging towertops of Babylon and Assyria vied with the flat, familiar rooftops of Phoenician architecture. Some walls were painted in blues and reds, which was the custom of the Egyptians, while others were bare and white.

"This isn't Jerusalem, this city! Tell me where to find

the bowmaker and I'll go with you. We're in a strange port, and we need a base of operations. The hostel will be that. You'll be tired tonight. You'll want a place to stretch out and sleep. You'll be grateful to me for considering ourselves first and the bows last, believe me."

Solomon grunted. Benajah was right, as he usually was, and he envied him his knowledge of the world. Solomon was wise, but it was with an inner wisdom, a wisdom of the spirit. During this trip to Sheba, his eyes were being opened to the fact that there was a worldly wisdom too, and that a man who possessed both would be truly learned.

They found the hostelry without trouble, and the bearded Minoean who owned it showed them to a room that looked upon the walled gardens at the side of the building Benajah professed himself pleased, and counted out a few copper pieces. The darkening shadows cast by a lowering sun sending its red beams into the room, and the emptiness of their middles, told them the lateness of the hour. The oil lamps would be lighted soon, and the inns and taverns would be crowded.

"We'll find a place to eat and taste some of the Arabian wines that never find their way to Jerusalem," said Benajah, flipping his cloak up over a shoulder.

Solomon's stomach began to rumble as he trailed Benajah out of the little room and across the cobbled inner court, with its wooden balconies and overhanging roof, which was open to form a long rectangle through which they could see the darkening sky and the faint twinkle of an evening star. Benajah was right. Food and wine and then a sound sleep were just what he needed.

The streets were deserted except for an occasional lategoer, such as the man in the blue woolen *kandys* who idled along behind them. Solomon turned and stared hard, but the shadowing cowl of the cloaklike garment hid his face, so that Solomon could not recognize the man. He only knew that he had seen him before, at the market

square. He told himself that they were being followed, but who in Sheba knew the king of Jerusalem tramped the stones like a common adventurer? He shook off the feeling of unease that bothered him, and set his steps to match those of his companion.

A wooden sign carved in the shape of an unclad woman announced the Inn of the Fertile Goddess. Laughter and the smell of wine came out into the street through its open doorway. A row of clay statuettes of the naked goddess Astarte were set in wall niches on either side of the door. Benajah grinned at sight of them, and elbowed Solomon.

"You'll never see anything like that where we live! These foreigners know how to enjoy life!"

Solomon brooded at the statues, flushing slightly, aware that a new mood was creeping over him. The caution and conservatism of his past were fading before the sight of these clay women that seemed so lifelike. These foreigners worshiped deities of the earth, rather than of the spirit. Their gods were war gods and fertility goddesses, who delighted in what Yahweh labeled as sinful. To himself, Solomon admitted that it would not be hard to worship a goddess who looked on intercourse as a sacred act, and whose priestesses were expert in carnal pleasures. He put this thought from him hurriedly, however; such a belief was no religion at all!

The man in the cowled *kandys* was standing in the shadows beyond a wall fountain, staring at them. Solomon glanced his way, then followed Benajah inside the tavern. Behind them, the man hurried off with long strides, as if to keep a suddenly remembered appointment.

The inn had a stone block floor set here and there with brick and mortar arches resting on thick pillars. Flaring oil lamps, hung on wall brackets, cast a yellowish radiance over flat wooden tables and bulging wineskins, over men in the shawled tunics of Assyria and the goatskins of the

desert traders, where they sat on long benches or wide wooden stools. The smell of roasting lamb and goat meat was in the air, with the acrid scent of wines and malt beer. Slave women, clad only in thin cotton skirts, carried trays heavy with sliced meats and round cheeses, or bore clay amphoras on their shoulders for the drinkers. A small coin would buy any one of them for the night, for harlotry was the side line of every inn from Sheba to Macedonia.

Benajah chose a small table close by a low platform that was part of the wide stone steps to the inn kitchens. A curtained doorway could be seen under the overhang of a wooden lintel. Movement behind the curtain caused it to billow outward every so often.

"The chamber where the dancing girls are to be found," the Kabzeelite whispered. "The dancing will begin in a little while, when we've finished eating and are drinking wine. We've one of the best spots in the whole place."

A slave woman came with a platter of steaming lamb and two earthenware bowls of stew. Benajah ran a hand up her slender leg, and said something that made her giggle Solomon stared at her smooth back, wishing that he had the insouciance of his companion. All he could do was sit here and yearn, bitterly ashamed that he was flushing.

To quell his thoughts, he attacked the stew and found it heavily spiced. The lamb was slightly overdone, but his appetite was such that he found it as sweet as the honeyed cakes of Lebanon. As he ate he sipped occasionally from a brass goblet filled with Coptic wine.

The food and the wine put new life in his body. He leaned back and stared around the inn. Now his eyes ran over the serving women, appreciating the fact that the owner of the Inn of the Fertile Goddess spent good silver to buy shapely women at the slave mart close by the sea wall. When one of the girls came to fill his goblet, he put a hand on her hip, and enjoyed the flirtatious glance she gave him.

As his eyes followed her swaying hips across the smoky room, his glance was caught by the figure of a man in a richly fringed Assyrian tunic. Solomon sat upright, remembering the man in the cobbled street who had trailed them from the hostel earlier.

He pulled his sword it had a straight iron blade and a bronze hilt whose pommel was carved to resemble a hawk's head, and had cost a small fortune around in front of him, between his legs. He leaned forward and spoke softly to Benajah.

The Kabzeelite was unconcerned. "The inn's a public place. Popular, too, to judge by the number of customers. Why shouldn't he find his way here?"

Solomon leaned back, unsatisfied. His mind was heavy with a sense of foreboding. If someone in Jerusalem knew its king was traveling to far Sheba, with only a single companion, murder might easily come stalking him. The rebellion of Adonijah was fresh in his mind. It had been his order that sent Benajah after him, to plunge his sword in his side. He was not so securely seated on his throne that another brother might not try to dislodge him.

A sistrum began to rattle, and a hush fell across the tavern. Soon now the dancing girls would be emerging from the curtained corridor, one by one, to tempt the diners with quivering thighs and bouncing breasts into parting with a silver stater for the privilege of bedding with them.

As the fringed curtain swept back and a redheaded Scythian slid out languidly into the lamplight, three men came up to the table where Solomon and Benajah sat. Benajah was watching the dancing girl, but Solomon came to his feet swiftly, seeing the intention in the eyes of the three men.

"You've sat long enough," one of them growled.

"This is our table. We come every night," snarled another.

Solomon smiled. He might be unused to worldly women, but he could read men as he read the Torah scrolls. His foot kicked the stool back out of his way.

"We like the table," he said softly. "We've been here since the food platters were passed about."

One of the men a Persian, to judge by his baggy trousers—drew his sword. "We waste time," he said to his companions, and he lunged forward.

On the stone platform, the Scythian woman screamed.

Solomon was not taken by surprise. He side-stepped the lunging Persian and rammed his hip hard into him, sending him off balance into the edge of the table. In that moment of paralysis when he hung helpless, Benajah stabbed down at him with a dagger, plunging it into his throat.

The other two men were cursing hotly. Their bronze swords flashed as they drew them, but the iron blade that Solomon carried was in the air and swinging down. Bronze was a harder metal than brass, out of which the ancients had made their swords, but it was not iron. The blade that was interposed against the swing of Solomon's blade sheared off an inch from its hilt.

Solomon came forward, driving the edge of his sword into the man's neck.

All around him, men were standing, yelling. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a momentary glimpse of the Assyrian, on his feet and staring with bulging eyes. Then the man was whirling, thrusting back his bench and shouting to the diners.

"Two strangers from only Astarte knows where!" his voice roared. "Are you men of Sheba going to sit there and see your friends butchered?"

Daggers came out, and short swords The whole tavern seemed to erupt as men surged off their stools and benches, shouting hoarsely. A bearded Parthian came elbow by elbow with a smooth-shaven Egyptian, running to get ahead

of three Ophir tribesmen. Slim daggers flashed in the torchlight. A table went down with a metallic crash of bronze goblets hitting the floor stones.

"Your back to the wall," panted Benajah, parrying the cut of a jabbing sword.

"No! Your back to my back!" cried Solomon. "Make for the door, before they organize!"

The suddenness of the quarrel stood as their ally in these early moments. In a few minutes, though, these men would draw back from their first impulsive rush, and would come at them in a more orderly manner. Then a dagger blade or sword edge would find its mark, and the sight of blood would be like the hunting cry of a pack of wolves.

Solomon slashed at a bearded face and saw it fall away in blood. He stabbed straight ahead, and wrenched his blade free of a falling body. He was a big man, and strong, and as he used his blade like a scythe to cut through men as if they were a field of grain, he drew Benajah after him.

He was conscious of a sense of pride as he swung the great iron sword. I'm as good a man as any one of you! The thought screamed in his mind. Pampered throughout his youth, sheltered and spoiled as only a royal son can be—especially since Bathsheba, who was his mother, was also his father's favorite wife—he had had few opportunities to show the raw courage he had inherited, along with his big strong body, from his shepherd forebears. This was his chance to stand alone in the world and prove he was fit in every way to be a king.

Solomon made the most of his opportunity. His long blade dipped and darted, flailed and stabbed. His eyes flashed proudly. His great shoulders were a ram thrusting through the crowd. His legs were like Lebanon cedars, planted firmly. He was the comet in the sky carrying Benajah as his tail behind him.

They used tables and stools as well as their iron blades,

whirling them sideways to tumble three men at once or lifting them aloft and heaving them into grinning faces. Solomon caught down a flaring oil torch from its iron socket and hurled it; Benajah cleared a path by pulling a man toward him with a hand on his tunic, then hurling his dying body sideways.

Mostly it was the iron sword blades that did the work. Iron was still a rare metal, and those who owned such swords were rich men or thieves. Solomon had selected the finest weapons from his royal arsenal. He wanted no swords that would crack and break off when struck in combat. Benajah was the ablest swordsman in Israel, and for fifteen years, even when Solomon was still a boy, he had been his teacher. None could say now that either man bested the other. Their flashing silvery blades swung high and fell, came sideways in a blinding slash, or thrust forward. Men fell before them like animals at a slaughterhouse.

The wide stone doorsteps were under their sandaled feet, and Benajah was crying over his shoulder, "Quick, now—on the count of five! Up the steps to the door!"

They went together, so swiftly that more than one man was caught in midstroke below them, unable to stop his blade from completing its useless thrust. Blood dripped a moment from their blades, and then the wooden door plankings were under their shoulders and the door was opening to their thrusting hands.

They were at the nearest corner when the men came spilling up out of the Inn of the Fertile Goddess, roaring for them, led by the Assyrian. As he swung his head back to look, Solomon saw the stocky soldier who had been the man's companion at the inn of Ibram the Amalekite. The Assyrian was pointing, saying something to the soldier; then he was shoving him toward them with a ringed hand.

"We'll split apart, Benajah," said Solomon hoarsely.

"I think they're after me. That Assyrian knows who I am. He's taken someone's gold to kill me."

"Then I'll stay by you!"

"No, no! Some will follow you, some will follow me. We've a better chance to live by splitting them, making it harder to catch us, so they'll lose interest in the game. Only the man who seeks my death will follow very far. I want to meet him face to face, and learn what I can."

There was no more time for words. Sandaled feet pounded the cobbles and men came running, shouting or silent, according to their individual habits. Solomon saw Benajah whirl and plunge into the shadows of a narrow alleyway. He himself ran on another block, then swung into a wide, palm-lined avenue.

All his life Solomon had been an athletic young man. He could jump farther and leap higher and run faster than anyone he had met in contest within the palace walls, and that included some of the best soldiers in Israel. Now he would discover how much of that was natural talent, how much the subservience of men who might wish to flatter princes.

Like an antelope of the Gaza plains he ran, with the scented spring night warm in his nostrils and the wind soft on his flushed face. Low garden walls and dark, arched gateways caught his eye. Sanctuary might be found behind one of those, but he held back. He could still hear the faint cries of outraged men far behind him. When he chose a wall to go over, he wanted no spying eyes to see him.

For half an hour he ran, doubling this way and that, until he was almost positive that he had lost them. Now he would seek shelter, until the dawn. By that time he would be certain that the men had given up the chase. His eyes were caught by the splendor of a stone building looming up behind a large palm garden. Its walls were covered with painted pictures, and a wide band of sculp-

tured friezes. Not even in Jerusalem was there a building more pleasing to the eye than this.

He went up over the wall like a gazelle jumping, hands flat to its capping, legs twisting up and sideways. As he came down lightly, in a clump of flowering narcissus, he realized that he was not the only person in the garden.

A naked girl was standing to her ankles in a pool, staring at him.

Chapter Three

THE WOMAN IN THE POOL was standing in the full flood of the moon like a silver statue, frozen by surprise. The water at her ankles gleamed with pallid fires, adding a radiance to her skin by reflection. Beneath the thin, curved brows, her dark eyes were alive with restless curiosity; and, Solomon sensed as he stood staring in the crushed flower bed, something of the same fierce hunger that was eating in him. A smile curved the corners of her mouth as if an idea had come suddenly to her, born of the sight of this man who had come over the garden wall like a hawk in flight. Almost casually she bent forward for the misty *khalak* of Egyptian byssus.

Then she was striding from the pool, drawing the large veil about her pale shoulders. There was an element of the unreal about her, an almost impersonal challenge that emanated from her swinging hips and striding legs.

In the distance, a temple bell began its clanging roll.

The sound put a flame in Solomon, freeing him from the spell into which the sight of the woman had frozen him. He went to meet her lightly, his iron sword still clutched in his hand. She made a picture heady enough to stir the life in a religious castrate of the goddess Cybele. Her ivory skin was smooth and rich. The thick black hair that was caught up behind her neck and piled atop her head for bathing was set here and there with golden wires from which dangled golden balls and silver teardrops. The *khalak* in which she wrapped herself as she came striding forward was a mist that enhanced the shapeliness of her body.

Solomon was breathless, staring. Never in his life had

he seen a woman as lovely as this; not the plump girls of Tyre or the lean, sophisticated women of Philistia, nor any woman he knew in Jerusalem. There was a radiance about her, and a slumbrous sensuality that tugged at something deep inside him. Only Anohbet of Egypt might compare with her.

"You have killed a man," said the woman softly, and wondered at the faint, delicious shudder that ran in her veins.

Blood was caked on his long sword blade. Solomon was a barbaric figure in fur pelisse and wide leather belt, and the plain scabbard at his side. Tall and with wide shoulders, he seemed in truth the soldier of fortune he so ably mimicked. His close-cropped black hair was a dark helmet above his tanned face. His gray eyes burned fiercely with the battle lust still in them.

"Many men," he whispered hoarsely. "At an inn, when three men quarrelled with me. An Assyrian called up the crowd and set them on me."

"And you got away! Unmarked?"

She moved forward. Her lips were smiling faintly now. As she put out a hand and ran her soft palm down his naked arm, Solomon shivered. A tiny plea was in her eyes and on her lips, asking him to recognize what this moment could mean between a lonely girl and a handsome stranger fleeing from murder in the Sheban night. No man or woman on all the earth but themselves knew they were here, alone. Solomon could feel his understanding beating out at her.

"Not even one tiny, small scratch to show for all that fighting?" she teased, her thin black brows lifting, laughing a little.

Solomon grinned and shook his head, then felt her fingers touch his belt buckle. They fumbled a moment as her mischievous eyes held his. The buckle came loose and the belt slid down onto the grass.

The temple bells bonged far away. A wind came into the garden and rustled the palm leaves and whispered past the pink blossoms of the almond trees. The woman extended her arms, lifting the misty veil upward, away from her body. Like that, she twirled, and the *khalak* was so light it stood straight out on the wind current.

His eyes ran over smooth, slim thighs and onto thrusting breasts. Then she was folding the thin byssus around her once again, and whispering. "As unmarked as my own body?"

Solomon swallowed twice before he could talk. His blood was drumming in his ears, echoing accompaniment to the brazen bells in the distance. "Just as free of wounds, though not as smooth, or as—exciting."

"Let me be the judge of that," she said softly, and she reached to unfasten the bronze brooch at his shoulders that held the fur *kaunake* to his body.

The panther skin slipped to the ground and lay beside the belt. The linen tunic followed, and now soft hands searched for wounds, and found none. Those palms and gentle fingertips were tiny fires playing about him, disrobing him of more than linen tunic and fur pelisse.

Solomon discovered that the inclination to sin that he conceived to be a part of his heritage from David and Bathsheba was akin to a white-hot flame burning inside him. He was not in Jerusalem now, within sight of Nathan the prophet or Zadok the high priest. He was far from the Temple and everything that was such a familiar part of his life. What was it Benajah had said, on the Red Sea sloop that had brought him here to Sheba? Be a man, and not only a king, in Sheba! As the words burned in his ears, he remembered the dancing girl Ramah, and the inviting eyes of the serving women at the inn.

"You have searched me for wounds, and found none. Now I shall search you!"

And he caught and held her gently and explored her

until her eyes swam with delight, and for this man and this woman there was only the night and the temple bells and the wind carrying their breathing this way and that. Her hardened breasts were crushed to his chest.

The night was warm and soft and fragrant, as was the body of the woman, and Solomon was swollen with the need to act, the need to hurl himself into this fray of bodies. He was a raging furnace fed by the touch of smooth thighs and whispered words, lost within himself and crying out with the madness of an ecstasy the like of which he had never known.

Dawn was a pearly red translucence in the lightening sky above the leafy branches of the mulberry trees when the woman stirred and opened her eyes. The tall man who had entered her garden short hours ago was staring at her, his eyes as devout before her loveliness as any worshiper at the Temple of Astarte, fronting the Royal Square in the city proper. Her soft arms pulled his face to her lips and she held him tightly, quivering a little.

The dawn grew brighter all around them, and now Solomon could see the colored flaggings inset between clumps of white-flowered, black-berried myrtles and the splashing fountains of tile and alabaster. Soon the building behind him, with its painted walls and ornate friezework, would be stirring. Its inhabitants would not relish the sight of a foreigner and a member of the household using the grass for a pleasure couch.

The woman seemed unworried, though.

She let her eyes languish on him, whispering, "If it weren't against the rules, I'd ask who you are."

Laughter came trailing from her throat at his blank look. She leaned closer, whispering in mock fierceness, "The rules of the mother goddess, stranger! The love rites and regulations of Astarte! Where have you been, that you don't know them?"

Her hand directed his eyes to the figure of a woman done in ebony and alabaster, in the same image in which the clay figurines at the Inn of the Fertile Goddess had been done. Set in a garden niche, the statue was lifesize and tinted so cleverly that it seemed a naked woman stared at him, offering her bosom.

"Astarte is worshiped everywhere except in Egypt and in a little kingdom to the north called Israel. Babylon and Ephesus, Tyre and Ecbatana, all worship her." Her eyes were sly as they slanted up at him. "You have the look of a traveler. Haven't you ever done this before?"

He knew what she meant now. In the cities she named, it was the custom of women to offer their bodies to a stranger once each year, in the temple gardens or between the marble pillars of the temple itself, on couches heavily piled with cushions, always waiting to be used. Sometimes a woman chose instead to shave her head completely and offer that hair to the altar, but this was frowned upon by the priests, for no strangers threw gold staters and silver tetradrachmas into the money pots at the sight of hair, as they did when they had enjoyed a particularly attractive matron. This was Astarte and her worship, and Solomon knew it dated back into the far reaches of antiquity, when men and women were not so learned as they were now, and invented gods to help fecundate their womenfolk so that the tribe could grow strong with numbers, and enrich their fields and flocks.

Anger swelled along the veins of his temples. This past night he had brought a tenderness and a wild yearning to his caresses and to his lips that had built a fire on her mouth and breasts. Perhaps his need had been born of Anohbet's coldness and the hunger for affection that lay deep in his nature. Whatever its sire, Solomon knew that never before had he given so much love with the fury of his body.

And now?

This woman looked on him as a living sacrifice to Astarte: a sort of votive animal, to be stretched on the ground as a lamb was stretched on the Altar of Burnt Offerings before the great Temple in Jerusalem!

Bitterness came into his mouth and he drew away a little, meaning to get to his feet. But the woman came after him, pillowing her head on his chest and surrounding him with her arms.

"You haven't answered me, stranger. Haven't you ever worshiped Astarte before?"

"Yes, I've done it," he lied, trying to smile. "In Gath and Succoth, and even in Erech, near Babylon."

"You've traveled far, then?"

"Far enough to know men are men and women are women, no matter what gods they serve."

"I've never been anywhere," she said wistfully. "All my life I've been shut up behind palace walls or locked away in gardens like these."

The woman sighed heavily and sat up, drawing her linen *khalak* closer around her shoulders, letting Solomon help her to her feet. "It's time for you to go now," she whispered, and heartbreak and loneliness were in her words. "I'm sorry that I will never see you again, but—but it can't be."

She walked with him to the garden gate and pushed back the bolt.

She looks like a forlorn child, thought Solomon, staring down into her bright eyes. Lonely and sad, and a little frightened. Instinctively he reached out and caught her and crushed her against him, as if his strength could somehow teach her courage.

When he kissed her cheeks, he found them wet.

Then the garden gate was closing behind him and he stood on a street in Sheba with the sun rising over the horizon, bringing red dawn in its rays. For a moment he wondered if it were a symbol.

Benajah was sleeping when Solomon swung into their little room in the hostel on the Street of Wine Merchants. He still wore his fur pelisse and sandals, and his sword hung from his broad leather belt as he lay sprawled across the bed. He was worried about me, Solomon told himself, stripping to his linen undergarment. He probably paced the floor all night, until he couldn't stay awake any longer, wondering whether he still had a king to serve.

The Kabzeelite woke as Solomon got into bed. Sleep fled from him as he swung himself to the edge of the rope matting, face haggard.

"No need for worry," Solomon reassured him. "I found shelter in a little garden. There was a girl there, bathing. Funny! That's how my father met my mother, isn't it? Bathsheba was bathing when David first saw her. I wonder if this one's married, too." He rose to an elbow. "She told me I couldn't see her again. Now, why should she do that, Benajah? Unless she's married, of course, and her husband's away from home. That could be it. Well, I promised not to return. I'll keep the promise, if I can."

Solomon let himself slide back onto the rope bed again. His eyes grew dreamy as they fixed on the whitewashed ceiling, and on the little brass oil lamp suspended from a beam on tiny chains. "She was lovely. Lovelier than any woman I've ever known. Except, perhaps, for . . ."

Benajah leaned forward, straining to hear the words his king spoke, but even as Solomon whispered there in the growing daylight, his words became a snore and his rope bed trembled. The Kabzeelite captain growled a moment, grinned, and finally laughed. The story of the night would keep. It was time now to sleep. When they woke, they would go in search of the shop of Midas the weaponmaker, who fashioned bows that could shoot an arrow through a bronze corselet. He tugged a fold of his woolen cloak up over his face to shut off a beam of sunlight poking through the window.

Solomon woke first, a raging thirst gnawing in his throat. He lay a moment, staring at the beamed ceiling and the little brass lamp. His eyes slid sideways to the small chest in the corner of the room, and the cheap clay bowl and water jug on the table beside it. A hand felt the floor beside the low bed, until his fingers curled about the hawk's-head hilt of his straight sword.

With this sword he had killed men last night. Not as a king killing men, issuing orders to soldiers before a battle, or bidding the royal executioners slay a rebel, but in the might of his own strength, fighting for his very life. It was like wine in a man's veins, this awareness of strength. Jerusalem did not offer him this intoxication. There he must sit on the throne and dispense justice and plan royal buildings, listen to Nathan mutter dire forebodings or Zadok the high priest whisper instructions. He had to cajole Hiram of Tyre into sending more cedars from Lebanon for the house he planned, or pore for hours over charts of his frontiers, that his kingdom should be safe against attack from north or south, east or west.

None of that was satisfying to a man who had known the fury of a sword fight and emerged unscathed, and found a woman whose body was a white madness afterward, like a reward for victory. The Greeks gave laurel wreaths, but he preferred the Sheban variety of award. He laughed a little, remembering and exulting, and bounded out of bed.

Sloshing water from the bowl into his face, he reached for a length of cotton cloth and swabbed his face. The water, kept cool in the earthenware amphora, was as refreshing as a glass of yellow wine. He dressed then, noting that the sun was well up in the sky. As he buckled his sword belt about his middle, he nudged Benajah into wakefulness.

"Midas the Saban won't keep his shop open forever! For a man who chased Rhynthos across half of Jerusalem

and inside my palace walls to get another look at his bow, you show a remarkable reluctance to meet the man who made it."

Benajah protested sleepily that he, too, had had an adventure last night as he fled from the inn hotheads, and that it had worn him out. Besides, he had to watch over his king, and that was wearing on a man. Add to this the fact that he had dreamed all night of Ramah, and it was no wonder he was so exhausted. Midas would still be there tomorrow.

Solomon set his big hands on Benajah and lifted him bodily from the bed. He held him like that, swaying sleepily, with one hand, while with the other he reached for the water jug. As the clear cool liquid ran down his face and back and chest and to his thighs, Benajah howled.

"Are you awake now?" asked Solomon solicitously, struggling against his laughter.

Benajah shook himself, shuddering. "Ay, I'm awake. Let's get on with it, then, and go back to Jerusalem! The longer we stay in Sheba, the better chance we have of staying here forever."

They went out into the street an hour past noon. It took them another hour of wandering and questioning before they located the Well of Arish, which was a round circle of stones set on a stone dais and covered over by a timbered roof. The caravans from Ophir and from Oman used this well, and sometimes sailors from the ships of Punt. Its stone steps were smooth and worn, and made a vantage point from which a traveler could look down the intersecting side streets and see the open-fronted shops that dealt in wine and meats and brightly colored linens from Egypt.

The weapons shop of Midas stood between a carpet stall and a bakery. The four upright posts that formed its pilasters were hung with hide shields and helmets. Inside the shop two tables flanked the doorway, laden with swords

and axes and slim bronze daggers. Tall racks and roomy chests held the products of the forges that blazed redly at the rear of the store, where a small flagged court stood open to the sky.

Benajah lost himself in admiration of the fine swords and helmets, for he was a soldier by birth and occupation; but Solomon was a king, and he had seen such weapons as these more than once at the royal armory in the palace of David. He made his wants known to the lean, one-eyed man who hurried forward at their entrance.

"I want bows. A thousand bows, each one made in a certain pattern. They are to be built up of wood and bone, and fashioned in a double curve."

The one-eyed man smiled and shook his head. "I know of such a bow, but I have none in the shop. They are hard to make."

Solomon reached for the leather purse he carried always on a thong around his neck. He brought it out to open its drawstrings and empty its contents across a cleared section of the refectory table, between a crested Greek helmet and a Hittite spear point.

That sudden flood of green emeralds and flawless white diamonds made Midas catch his breath. He bent forward in amazement, staring. Finally he whispered, "Such jewels as those would make a man the richest in Saba! Who are you?"

"Make me a thousand bows and the jewels are yours, but no questions."

The one-eyed man straightened slowly. He went away, into the darker recesses of the long shop, where dusty chests were one on top of another. In these chests were his most precious pieces. A clap of his palms brought a slave running to his side, to kneel and lift chests to one side, so that Midas could raise the cover of the bottom coffer.

He brought out a linen covering and gently unwrapped it, walking toward Solomon. A bow was inside the wrap-

ping, a duplicate of the bow Rhynthos the Cretan had brought in his dirty sheepskin to Jerusalem.

Solomon took the bow almost reverently, stroking its gleaming wood and horn. He bent it slowly, nodding his satisfaction. "This is the bow I seek. Can you make a thousand of them, and how soon?"

The weaponmaker gestured to Solomon to follow him. He took him into the rear of the shop, past hearths and furnaces glowing redly, to the open court. More than twenty men worked here, almost naked against the heat of the forge fires. Metal clanged where hammers bounced on spear points white-hot from the fires. Men bent and thrust blazing sword blades into urns of cool water so that steam rose in immense clouds, almost blotting them from sight. In a little corner of the court three men worked on wood, their bone tools traveling gently up and down spear handles and shield rims, polishing and carving.

"I am the finest weaponmaker from India to Egypt," said the one-eyed man crisply. "I hire good men and pay good wages for their skill. Some of them are old soldiers who have fought in every corner of the world. Others are beginning craftsmen, here to learn the trade. All of them owe me allegiance. For the jewels you showed me, I will use all of them in making the bows, secretly and by night if that should be your wish. I will send agents to docks to buy more ashwood, and many horns of dead ibexes."

Solomon nodded. "I will leave a quarter of the emeralds and the diamonds in your hands, as evidence of my good faith and trust. The rest I shall put into the hands of Eli ben-Sholoth, the silk merchant. When you deliver the bows to him, within a month's time, he will give you the remainder of the jewels."

Midas expressed himself as delighted at such an arrangement. He would need money to buy the rare wood and horn that must go into the shaping of these bows, but one or two of the jewels left on deposit would provide for

them. One month might not be enough time to make one thousand such bows, but if the wood and horn were available in Saba or in Ophir, Midas would buy them, no matter the cost.

The weaponmaker called out, and a small man with long black hair that fell to his naked shoulders and clad in a twist of spotted fur limped from the farthest forge. "This is Shun," explained Midas. "It is he that made the first bows. He comes from a land far to the east and calls himself a Uighur. From what he has told me, it is a land of great forests and wide deserts, while to the south are mountains so tall they go up into the sky itself."

Solomon had never seen a man like this, with such dark skin and slant eyes, small and wizened and bent. As Midas talked on, he understood that these Uighurs lived in felt tents and wore skins for clothes, and used the milk and the meat of some northern kind of deer for their food. They were master hunters and riders, and their bow—strengthened with horn and shaped with a double curve—was the best weapon of its kind in all the world.

"Shun killed a man and stole his wife, and so was banished from the tribe. Somehow he found his way to me. I fed him, nursed him back to health, and put him to work. When he made that first bow for me, I knew I was overpaid for the little I've done for him. When the thousand bows are completed, I'll give him one of the jewels and let him go back to his own people, if he wants."

Solomon brooded at the Uighur. "Have him make me arrow shafts and bow cases and quivers as well, enough for one thousand archers."

"It shall be done, great lord. The jewels will more than cover such a trifling extra." Midas smiled faintly. "You will notice that I do not ask your name, and that I am content to deal with Eli ben-Sholoth. Who you are does not matter. Your jewels speak for themselves. However, to ease your mind, be sure that I will not reveal to anyone

that I am making so many bows for a single order. Only a king would carry such a fortune in rare stones next to his skin. Only a king would need one thousand such bows. But in what land you are king is no concern of mine. And my men will be as secretive as myself."

The Uighur bowed and retreated to his fires at a wave of Midas' hand. Then the one-eyed man escorted Solomon to his open doorway and bade him go with the blessings of Shamash, who watched over far travelers.

Lamps were being lighted in the stonework windows of the buildings they passed now, for it was later than dusk and the aromas of baking barley bread and roasting meats and fish were filling the air. Benajah said wryly that Solomon might be able to live on thin air, being a king, but he was only a common soldier and must have food in his middle to give him strength. They would find a tavern and eat.

They were passing a little street altar to Ea, set in a semicircular recess and fashioned of black basalt, when a dozen men came out of the shadows of a gateway lintel at them. Solomon caught one flashing glimpse of a bearded face and a stocky figure—recognizing the man as the bodyguard who had been with the Assyrian at the inn of Ibram the Amalekite—before the flat of a sword hit his side, knocking him backward onto the cobbles. Men were shouting in the darkness, howling their triumph. Their naked sword blades flashed crimson where an oil cresset lighted the entryway of a noble's brick dwelling.

Benajah was on his feet, roaring, using his sword as a flail, standing over the fallen Solomon.

For a moment, as the dull pain begun by the thwack of the sword blade across his ribs vibrated through his body, Solomon lay motionless. Then he struggled to a knee, aware that Benajah was being hard-pressed, trying to fend off five swords at once even as two more came for his unprotected back. The anger in Solomon was a biting

force that drove away the pain and brought him to his feet in one fluid motion. Then his blade was scraping out of his scabbard, swinging up to catch the downstrokes of the men who rushed Benajah from the rear.

Swords met and sparked. Solomon swung his blade, roaring in his throat as he had roared at Rabath when his armies had smashed the spearmen of Ammon. Once again he and Benajah stood back to back, but now they were in the open street, and voices were crying out above them where heads peered from grilled and recessed windows.

Solomon felt the sodden contact of steel on flesh as his edge cut into the neck of a man before him. One of Benajah's opponents lay twitching on the street cobblestones, but there were five men still facing them. These were no winesellers and silk merchants, such as had come at them last night in the Inn of the Fertile Goddess. These were hard-bitten mercenaries, recruited from dockside taverns and veterans of more than one murderous foray in the streets of Sheba.

Benajah reeled to a sword slash on an arm.

Solomon rammed hard into his captain when a point drove across his naked thigh, bringing blood.

As he fought for leg room, discovering that the men were switching their attack from Benajah to himself, Solomon searched feverishly with his eyes for some vantage place where he and the Kabzeelite could stand side by side with both their sword blades facing the assassins. That recessed doorway by the altar niche would be such a place.

Ogoth recognized the move almost before it began.

"Don't let them reach that entry gate!" he roared, panting in his eagerness to flesh his blade.

Solomon knew that the stocky mercenary was the guiding genius of these hired killers. If he could get at him and kill him, he and Benajah might yet win free. He

set himself to the task, using his iron sword blade as if it were a feather. He slashed and cut, fended off a falling blade and ducked under another, as Joab and Benajah had taught him.

Now Ogoth was before him, his grin a tight, mocking thing between his straggly beard and thin mustache. The Miletan was an experienced swordsman. If he could hold Solomon's attention, his hired swords could push to the kill. Ogoth was no egoist. Another than himself could get the king of Israel, providing he won the reward that Nerkal promised.

Ogoth fought cunningly. He made mock advances and sudden feints. His swordplay backed Solomon up to expose his unprotected left side.

Solomon knew he was in a pocket, pinned there by Ogoth's dexterity. The men were coming for him, swooping in with their steel held low. They would not strike to kill this time, only to cripple. Then when he was helpless, they would slay him at their leisure.

Waiting would bring him death, Solomon knew, so he hurtled forward. He used his blade in a slicing fashion, weaving it from left to right. Ogoth was forced back one step, then two.

Now Solomon had room to move. On feet so agile they seemed the pads of panthers, he whirled and leaped at the daggermen. His blade came down in a cut that caught both of them bent, stabbing futilely upward into the empty air where Solomon had stood a moment before.

The men went down without a sound.

Solomon whirled and drove toward Ogoth. He caught him against the mud bricks of a high wall, with his back pressed hard against the stones. The long iron sword swept up and down, beating aside the lighter, softer bronze blade. It drove down and into the shoulder and chest of Ogoth, pinning him motionless on the bricks as death took him.

Hoarse voices were shouting as Solomon wrenched his sword loose and turned to meet the rest of the assassins. Feet came pounding from the direction of the Well of Arish, and then more than a score of mailed spearmen swept into the street.

"The city guard!" rasped one of the hired killers, and took to his heels.

Solomon and Benajah were left alone, too weary to run. Blood ran down the channels of their blades and dripped redly on the cobblestones. Solomon bent and began to cleanse his blade with a handful of Ogoth's cloak.

The mailed soldiers deployed about them in an arc, lifting their spears as if to cast them. Benajah stepped forward, raising his left hand, palm out.

"We were set upon by killers," he explained. "We were only defending ourselves."

The guard officer was a scented dandy, too swollen with a sense of his own importance to listen to anyone but himself. These two travelers wore good cloaks and warm panther skins. They were big and strong, and had the look of hardened adventurers. It might be that they had the wherewithal to ransom themselves. Otherwise, for street brawling and killing, they could be punished by being sold into slavery. In either event, Ajjal the guard captain would profit.

"Arrest them," he said to the spearmen.

Solomon came and stood beside Benajah. Solomon recognized the handicraft of Midas in the length and grace of the spear points at their bellies. One false move and they would be plunged into their middles. He opened his fingers and let his sword clang on the stones.

Ajjal cried out greedily and thrust forward between the ranks of his spearmen. His hand darted out and came up with the sword. By the beard of Ea! This was a weapon worth having, with its straight iron blade and the hilt of bronze set with small sapphires where the eyes of the

hawk's head formed its pommel. Hungrily he looked from the sword to the two men, studying them more closely.

At last he smiled. "You look like men of property. There is a certain air about you. I'm sorry to inconvenience you, but you must understand that Queen Balkis allows no killing in her city streets. You'll have to come along with me to the city dungeons. I'll see you're well cared for."

He thrust Solomon's sword into his belt and moved off, snapping orders. One of the men wrenched Benajah's blade from his hand and shoved him forward. The spearmen closed in around them, forming a phalanx. Like that, they were marched across the city.

They were permitted to speak to no one.

Once inside the stone walls of the dimly lit prison, they were stripped naked and searched. Ajjal stood stupefied as the leather pouch was ripped from Solomon's neck and opened, and a stream of glittering emeralds and diamonds cascaded out onto the bare wooden tabletop of the guard-room table.

Hastily the guard captain gathered up the jewels and returned them to the pouch. His eyes touched Solomon greedily as he whispered hoarsely, "No one shall know of these gems but you and I. I can see you are a great lord in disguise. Be at ease. I'll see what can be done for you."

With only their linen tunics left to them, Solomon and Benajah were thrust into a cell and fastened by one wrist each to manacles set into the brick and mortar of opposite walls.

"That officer will come back at night and slit our throats," Solomon said heavily. "I know that greedy look. He'll keep the jewels and leave Sheba, and be a rich man."

Benajah said hoarsely, "Let me call the guards and tell them who you are!"

Solomon smiled. "Call them, Benajah, but it will do no good. He'll have bribed each with a jewel by this time."

Benajah shouted himself hoarse, but only the chittering

of the dungeon rats answered him. At last he said harshly, "You were right, as you always are. We'd have done better to leave the jewels with Midas: At least the thousand bows would have gone to Israel."

As if overcome with a sudden realization of what had happened, Benajah began to rant and yell, hurling himself left and right, straining against the manacle that held him. Solomon stood tall and silent, staring off into the gloom and the blackness, wondering which of his brothers it had been that had sent men into Sheba to kill him.

Chapter Four

Balkis, Queen of Sheba, stretched lazily on the soft cushions that covered her ebony-and-gold divan, one slim leg held out so that her toes could be painted red by a kneeling slave girl. A transparent silk shawl swathed her middle as another slave bent to touch green malachite to her upper eyelids, making them glisten. Black nard from Hebron was used to darken her thin, plucked eyebrows, while liquid musk was being rubbed into her ivory shoulders. Tonight Balkis was to receive the ambassadors from Egypt at a ceremonial dinner in the palace dining hall, but her mind was not on politics.

She drowsed a little, brooding thoughtfully, trying to still the fierce unrest that beat through her veins. The worst of it was, she thought, she did not know the reason for the emotions that stormed in her body. She writhed a little, twisting so that a feather dipped in henna slipped across her foot.

A little silence fell in the room as the slave girl crouched in panic, fearing her rage. Balkis only smiled and said, "It was my own fault, Neris. Continue!"

From two large round cosmetics tables, the slaves lifted jars and opened their lids. These jars were a necessary part of Balkis' bedchamber. They were made of black diorite and white alabaster, red hematite and pale ivory. They held depilatories and oils, malachite to green the eyelids and antimony to brighten the eyes. There were perfumes from Sheba and Ophir, henna from India, indigo dye for the hair, jasmine hair oil, Persian lemon for the skin: all the aids to beautify the female body that her world could produce.

Now Balkis stood and lifted her arms as her slaves placed a long, pleated tunic of thin byssus about her, girdling it with a chain of golden discs, draping the skirt so that it hung full and unruffled. A wide golden band, not unlike the broad Egyptian breast collar, was studded with carnelians and rubies. Tiny sandals whose thongs were fashioned of thin gold ribbons encased her feet, the toes of which held tiny rings.

Her thick black hair was set with a golden diadem, with thin strips of red gold dangling down. From a large copper coffer Balkis selected a half-dozen jeweled rings, and she held her fingers spread so that they might be fitted to her fingers.

"Have the ambassadors arrived yet, Neris?"

Her toilet woman smiled slightly. "They have been waiting one full turn of the water clock's mill wheel."

"Good!" Balkis stared at her reflection in the highly polished silver mirror that a kneeling girl held up. "Curbing the anxiety of foreign statesmen is a most important part of being a queen. It lets them think, and wonder if you are as anxious for a trade agreement as they."

From below the sleeping chamber came the voices of men raised in anger. Balkis paused, turning slightly from the mirror. Her uplifted brows asked a question. In answer to her unspoken query, Neris padded from the room on bare feet.

While she waited, Balkis rearranged the drape of her pleated tunic, so that a little more of her pointed breasts might show. It was always good tactics to distract the minds of men during a conference. Long ago she had discovered that the beauty of a woman was better than strong drink at befuddling the senses of an ambassador.

In a little while the chief slave woman was back, bowing low. "Kabesh requests audience, Your Highness. They have caught Ajjal –captain of the city guard, you remember?—with a fortune in his belt."

Balkis laughed, honestly amused. "A fortune? Well, now. This intrigues me. Sheba is none so wealthy that her soldiers can be so rich. Shall we see this fortune? It will serve to keep the ambassadors waiting a little longer for their audience."

Ajjal was a perspiring, trembling hulk as the giant Nubian who held his arm hurled him half the length of the chamber floor, to end with his forehead touching the hennaed toes of the Queen herself.

"Mercy! Mercy, all-good, all-powerful Balkis!" he whimpered.

Kabesh, who was the general of her armies and palace chamberlain in times of peace, stepped forward with a clank of bronze mail. He was a big man, heavily bearded. A red cloak hung by a silver brooch from his shoulders. His left hand was set on the hilt of a short, stabbing sword. His right hand held a small leather pouch.

"We found this on Ajjal," said the general harshly. Balkis looked a little bored as she examined her fingernails, wondering whether this bright-red shade went with the darker jewels in her great golden collar. "Empty it, Kabesh. Let us see what sort of fortune Ajjal has been able to make for himself in our service."

Kabesh moved to a polished sandalwood table inlaid with pearl and ivory. As he upended the pouch, a score of huge green emeralds and fire-white diamonds went skidding across its surface.

"Mother Astarte!" whispered Balkis, staring in amazement.

A smile curved the lips of her major-domo. "He took them from a prisoner, Highness. He was on his way out of the city when my men captured him. One of the guards, who conceived himself cheated out of a just share of this loot, babbled in my ear in time for me to order out a search party."

Ajjal writhed in terror, scraping his face across the

tiled floor until it began to bleed. "Mercy! Mercy on me!—"

Balkis considered him dubiously. There were a dozen deaths she could order, but it never hurt to inquire fully into a case before meting out punishment.

"Who is this prisoner, Kabesh?"

The officer shrugged. "Nobody knows. Some adventurer, probably. All I've been able to learn is the fact that he rented a room in a hostel on the Street of Wine Merchants and that he has a friend with him."

"You saw this man, Ajjal," said Balkis coldly. "Who is he? Where is he from?"

The terrified man babbled, "A foreigner, Most High. A big man with black hair on his head, all curly. He wore nothing but a tunic and a panther skin. And he carried a long iron sword."

"A sword you stole, you gutter swine," said Kabesh.

Balkis forced her voice to a semblance of calmness. "Kabesh, take this bleating greedyguts to the very dungeon where he imprisoned the foreigner. Bring this foreigner to us. Clothe him and wash him, and return his sword." She paused a moment, toying with the emeralds and diamonds on the sandalwood table. "We shall return his jewels if he can convince us that they truly belong to him. We shall determine what will be done with Ajjal after we have had speech with the foreigner."

Ajjal wept openly as the big Nubian bent and lifted him easily to his feet. Neris knelt and held the bright silver mirror up so that Balkis could take one last look at herself before going to join the ambassadors from Egypt. But the Queen of Sheba was busy returning the jewels to the leather pouch, too deeply excited in her thoughts to pay her any attention.

The bronze manacles were eating into his thick wrists and the cold stone of the dungeon was damp and hard against his naked back as Solomon stood in the black-

ness, head bowed. He did not feel the bite of the bronze or the wetness of the stones. His mind was far away, back in the palace rooms of Jerusalem. Once again he was listening to Anohbet as her honeyed voice mocked him.

"This God of yours, this Yahweh," she was saying. "Can you prove that He is stronger than my gods? Stronger than Osiris? Stronger than black Set?"

He could not prove this to her. Though he tried, again and again, calling up the wisdom Nathan taught him, and the wisdom Yahweh Himself had promised him at Gibeon, still he could not do this thing his Egyptian wife asked.

Solomon writhed in the darkness, and now he felt the exquisite agony of blood moving in veins swollen by tight metal. His head went back hard against the stone wall and his open eyes stared blindly at the darkness.

"Yahweh, hear me!" he whispered. "Yahweh, give me strength! Give me the means to free myself from these chains that hold me, from this cell that oozes water from its walls!"

Benajah heard him, and said, "Praying won't do any good. We've been here more than two days. We haven't had food or water. Another day or so and we'll die. Two rats in a cage."

"You said that guard captain would be back to put a knife between our ribs, but he still hasn't come," Solomon reminded him.

Benajah was glum. "I'd rather he did that than have to face this lingering sort of death. It unnerves a man."

"Pray, then," Solomon told him harshly.

"I'm a soldier, not a priest. You do the praying!"

And Solomon prayed, deep inside himself. Yahweh, if this is Your Will, give me a sign. If I am to die in this black hole, send me a word. But the dungeons were silent and dark, and there was no sound but the faint scrape of a rat running in a distant cell.

After a while he lifted his face again and looked upward. Then send me a sign that You have not deserted me! Send me a sign!

The sweat stood out on his forehead in the intensity of his will.

"A sign!" he croaked between dry lips. "A sign!"

The light came then, faint and very far away, and Benajah, who had heard that dry rasp of Solomon's voice, cried out himself, hoarsely.

Men were coming: soldiers, to judge by the clang of metal on metal, and the measured steadiness of their stride. The lantern that punched its pale beams into the darkness of the dungeons swung lazily back and forth in the hand of the man who carried it.

The lantern light grew brighter until it came to a stop before the bars of their cell. It was lifted high into the air, showing a big man in a red cloak. A short stabbing sword with a gold handle hung a little below his left hip.

Benajah straightened and called out. "You, there! You're a soldier. I'm a soldier myself. A captain in the armies of Israel. By whatever gods you worship, use that sword on us. Don't leave us in this place to rot while we're still alive!"

"You won't rot," said the man, and there was something in his voice that made Benajah stand straighter.

"You hear that, Solomon?"

"I hear it."

Solomon was smiling. Deep within himself, he was content. Yahweh had given him a sign that he was still the favored of his God. Now he did not mind the pain of the manacles, but watched calmly and with a faint smile as a jailer came with a bunch of keys to unlock the bronze hoops that held his wrists.

He would have fallen, but the captain in the scarlet cloak was there with a hand under his armpit to steady him.

"Kabesh is my name," the officer grunted. "Palace captain to the Queen. She sent for you. We caught the carrion who stole your long iron sword and your jewels. He'll hang in the same bracelets that held you."

Then they were in the corridor and Ajjal was being dragged—screaming, with his mouth wide open and his eyes bulging—into the cell and locked within the bloody greaves so that he hung suspended in them, his toes just touching the damp floor. Kabesh stared at him contemptuously.

"The foreigner made no sound for a day and a night, Ajjal. You're screaming already!" The Sheban officer shrugged at Solomon. "He'll be mad by morning. Frothing at the mouth. His kind always go fast once they run into trouble. Noble blood. Ptah!"

Kabesh spat and tightened the leather belt that held his short sword. "I'm an Aganenite, myself. A horse herder in my youth, around Zafar. What are your people?"

"Shepherds," Solomon answered.

"I knew it! Takes hard work and hard living to put stuff such as you have into a man. Come along. Balkis summoned you to her dining tables and I've got to clean you up. You can't go like that. Ptah! You stink!"

Solomon said wryly, "Your jailer forgot to leave me perfumes when he locked the manacles on me."

Kabesh stared a moment, then threw his head back and roared laughter. His big hand came out to slap Solomon hard on a shoulder in camaraderie. "By the smooth butt of Astarte! Soldier, I like you! Put in a good word for Kabesh, if the Queen takes a fancy to you."

Then he was striding forward, bringing his escort behind him, with Solomon and Benajah at his elbows. They mounted two flights of stone steps, between high towering walls in which were set pitch torches. An oaken door gave way to a room filled with weapons set on racks, and two wooden tables where a handful of guardsmen were

throwing large ivory dice marked with painted dots. At sight of Kabesh they came to attention, but the palace captain waved a hand and went on, out of the room and into a long corridor.

Solomon and Benajah were shown into a narrow chamber fitted with a sunken bath that was filled with warm water.

"Wash yourselves," Kabesh told them. "I'll have different clothes for you shortly. Throw those rags away." He stared at them a moment as they stripped naked, grunting in admiration of their big bodies, ridged so heavily with muscles under the pale skin. "You'll need someone to curl your hair, too, and shave you, if you want a clean chin."

"And perfume," Solomon said as he sank down into the marble tub below the level of the floor. "Don't forget the perfume."

Kabesh chuckled. "Only kings use perfume, soldier!" He went out, rumbling laughter.

Benajah waited until the sound of mirth disappeared. He was submerged to his beard, but his eyes were bright, almost feverish.

"Now what?" he wanted to know. "When this Balkis learns she's caught the King of Israel, what'll she do with you? And me? You probably know how much ransom she'll ask!"

"I also know that nobody in Jerusalem will pay any such ransom. Anohbet? She hates me because I won't knuckle under to Osiris. Nathan? He's a man of God, not a moneylender. The businessmen? They complain now that I overtax them. My brothers? Jothab, for instance?"

Benajah groaned. "He'd be more likely to pay this Balkis to take off your head and send it to him." He hesitated a moment, rubbing soap into his flesh and watching it form bubbles. Then, very softly, he went on. "You know what they'll do to us when the ransom is refused?

They have a number of unpleasant ways to kill a man, these kings and queens of Sheba, when their anger is aroused. Flaying the skin off a man while he's alive and yelling. Pouring molten gold down his throat. Stuffing him with sand fresh off their deserts."

Solomon smiled faintly. "Is this the Benajah who killed a lion all by himself? Who snatched a spear from an Egyptian and killed him with his own weapon?"

Benajah grunted. "All right to mock my courage. I'd fight fifty Shebans if it came to that, and I saw a chance to win free."

"Nobody abuses your courage. Stop making yourself a martyr. Just leave things to me. Yahweh got us out of that dungeon. To die under a flayer's knife? No!"

The Israelite soldier stared at his young king, aware that the leadership between them, which he had assumed when they left Jerusalem, was slowly passing from his hands. Now it was Solomon who guided, who calmed and instructed. It was as if he were made of raw iron, and the experiences into which he was thrown were the appliances of the weaponmaker. That raw iron of his spirit was being heated red-hot by the forge fires and the pumping bellows, and thrust hissing into the cold waters of the cooling pot, to temper it.

Benajah drew himself up out of the hot, scented water and began to slap his body dry with his big hands. He said, "You think that Yahweh bothers himself with us, here in Sheba?"

Solomon spoke out of the deep conviction of his spirit. "He is with us everywhere, Benajah. Is He a god like Osiris, who lives only along the Nile? Or like this Astarte, who seems to live only in the body of a woman? He is everywhere!"

"And He will make a miracle, right before my eyes?"

"He will, and soon!"

Benajah shrugged and went to sit on the wooden bench

against the wall. Taking a woolen cloth, he began to buff his body. "If I had anything to wager, I'd bet against the chance."

Solomon laughed softly. "I should bet with you, but I won't. I am too sure of winning."

The door opened then and Kabesh entered, followed by three Hittite slaves carrying a bronze corselet and greaves for Benajah, and a white tunic with Tyrian red borders and high white doeskin sandals for Solomon.

A little man came with them, holding a small wooden box that contained tweezers and curlers, rounded paint stick, and a pair of bronze razors. He was a barber off the Square of Nobles, faintly effeminate, fussing and fawning, but he knew his trade. When he was done with Solomon, he seemed the king he was; Benajah he made look like an important general.

Kabesh smiled wryly when he stood off and inspected them. "As noble a pair of ambassadors as Balkis ever entertained. If you want jobs in the palace guard when she's done questioning you—if she lets you live, that is—I'll have two places open for you. We could get along, we three."

His bantering mood dropped from him, and he grew sober. "It's my hope you aren't thieves. We crucify thieves, here in Sheba. But no matter. What's to be will be. Let's go along now, before Balkis grows restless."

He went out into the corridor and Solomon and Benajah went with him.

A sense of high adventure was growing in Solomon. He walked eagerly, anxious to meet this female ruler of the seaport city of Sheba. A plan was growing in his fertile brain, but first he would have to learn for himself what manner of woman sat the high-backed throne of Sheba.

The dinner was not going as Balkis wanted. These three gentlemen of Luxor were strangers to Sheba, and

As if in answer to those whispered prayers, this tall stranger had loomed before her.

Never before had she enjoyed such pleasure with a man. Trained since girlhood in the gynacaseums of Astarte, where she was to be priestess one day as well as queen, for the rulers of Sheba were king-priests, she was no newcomer to the ancient rites of love. In the traditional thirty and six ways, she had offered up the bodily sacrifice to the Mother of Fertility in the past. Yet this man was unlike any other she had known. There was a wildness and an untamed spirit in him that reflected itself in his body.

Her lips quivered as she remembered the loathsome boredom of hours spent at looms in her childhood, learning to weave brightly colored pictures into Arabian wool, and the patience she had to be taught, seated at her father's knee, while he discussed state matters with his advisers.

Was it any wonder she had fallen into the arms of this handsome stranger? There had been no tiny woolen dolls or clay playthings for a daughter of the king. No playmates, either, for who was fit to associate with the girl who would one day be queen? Instead of games, she learned laws; instead of rolling hoops, she unrolled dusty parchments on which were scrawled dry histories and faded maps. This was no life for a girl with strong red blood in her veins, and she hated it.

And so when the stranger offered her an instant of ecstatic forgetfulness, she welcomed him with all her senses. She had not been prepared for the storm of emotion that he was to rouse in her, though; neither for the wildfire that blazed in her spirit nor for the shocking delights that flooded her flesh. When she had realized that she would never see him again, tears came into her eyes, for even queens can weep when their hearts are full.

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Money that her tradesmen earned in Egypt made Saba and her queen wealthy, and kept her powerful. She would need that power, as reflected in chariots and strong soldiers, in case her growing wealth should tempt some neighbor like Babylon or Media. Her merchants could never recover that tax by raising the price of the goods they sold. It would have to come from over-all profits. This was what galled the pride of Balkis, for it would be like a tribute paid to Pharaoh.

One of the ambassadors said softly, "Siamon understands that royal Saba will be hesitant at first to enter into this agreement, but he asks me to remind her that Egyptian copper and silver had paid for the jewels she wears, for her garments and for the very couches on which we recline."

Balkis felt a stab of anger, but what she might have said at that moment was forestalled by the sudden clang of a brazen gong suspended on bronze chains. The sound rang through the dining chamber, back and forth from its tiled and painted walls.

Neris stepped forward and bent to Balkis. "The foreign men, Highness. The men who own the jewels."

Balkis clapped her hands, sitting a little straighter. "My mirror, Neris! My little hand mirror. Where is it?"

Neris smiled and held out the round disc of polished brass so that Balkis could see her ripe red mouth and thin plucked brows, and the thick black hair that was plaited with gold wires and flecked with gold dust below the rich diadem set on her head like a crown. Under the thin byssus, her body gleamed like pink pearl.

An exclamation from one of the ambassadors of Egypt swung her around.

Two men walked elbow to elbow toward the dining couches, slightly ahead of Kabesh. One of them was wide and powerful, clad in borrowed mail and greaves: a dark man, bearded and somber, carrying a crested helmet under

an arm. The other man was tall and lithe, with curly black hair and steady gray eyes, and there was something in the way he wore the borrowed red cloak and short white chiton that told the dry-lipped Balkis that he was more than the adventurer he seemed. He came with easy strides, a tiny smile on his lips. As Balkis was at ease in her own royal palace, so he was at ease.

Balkis was speechless.

This tall man who stood before her was the same man who had come up over her palace garden wall, two short nights ago, to bring a strange, frightening ecstasy to her body and restlessness to her spirit!

The Queen of Sheba had been tired to boredom that night, weary of interminable counsels and of graybeards poring over maps and old scrolls, whispering advice into her ears with their fetid breaths. Something inside her had been rising in rebellion against court functions when she must be dressed and adorned in fine linens and precious jewels, with none to see but sly ambassadors and the envious wives of her nobles.

The garden pool offered her a brief respite from the cares she assumed when she sat the gold-and-ebony throne of her fathers. Trade agreements with Egypt, the treaty with the desert nomads whose religion was that of caravan robbery, the interests of her city merchants—these were the problems that weighted down her days. In its scented waters she might forget the feuds between the worshipers of Astarte and the devotees of Marduk, the protests of businessmen and ship captains over her tariffs and the knowing advice of her counselors.

Staring down at Solomon, she remembered how she had slipped from her bedchamber out into the spring night, to splash and swim a little. As the water lapped about her, she had wished fiercely for a break in the monotony of the life that was slowly smothering her youth and beauty.

Astarte of the Offered Breasts!

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Once, long ago in her childhood, she had found a doll

in the street and had hidden it carefully under her little cloak, carrying it home and into her bed. For almost a month she had kept the toy, naming it Astare, after the goddess. When it had been discovered, her mother took it and threw it into the fire.

This big stranger was another Astare. Instead of fire, he would sink into the oblivion of anonymity, and be forever lost to her.

Yet here he was, striding forward across the mosaic tiles of her audience-hall floor, smiling at the Egyptian ambassadors, who were staring incredulously, hurriedly rising to their feet and pushing back the benches on which they sat. Great Astarte, Mother of the Magic Arts! Why should her heart slam so in her bosom? Why should her palms grow moist and her knees turn to water at sight of him?

Her stranger of the pool was only an adventurer with a long iron sword at his side. From what royal palace had he looted that blade? Those black ringlets on his regal head were like raw iron themselves. Those muscles that her palms had felt the other night were rippling now under his tanned skin. Balkis felt faint.

Astarte could have made him a noble, at least! She knew the urge to giggle at the thought that a noble would have been fleeing through the streets at the midnight hour. All the nobles she knew were sodden with wine at that time, stuffed with peacock wings, or closeting themselves with the latest slave their house chamberlains had purchased in the Square of the Slave Sellers.

The ambassador from Egypt who had cried out harshly was standing, muttering to his fellows. At his words they came to their feet in frantic haste. While Balkis watched amazed, they bowed low as the tall man approached, murmuring greetings.

Solomon came to a halt. He knew these men. He had met them at court functions in Memphis, when he had gone to seek the hand of Anohbet.

"Amenotep. And Khumufu. And Menes," he said in greeting.

"May the Sun God warm you forever in his rays," murmured Amenotep politely, striving to mask the dismay that convulsed him. Lifting his head, he stared hard at the stunned Balkis. His lips worked. Then he said, "We of Egypt did not know that royal Saba was entertaining a fellow ruler. We crave leave to withdraw."

Balkis started numbly at Solomon and the three ambassadors. Twice her tongue came out to moisten her lips, but she could only look down at her lover in utter helplessness. Her heart was pumping in most unqueenly fashion under her pleated tunic. Her adventurer in a panther skin with a long iron sword was turning into a courtier known to the lean Egyptians. She had just seen them bow before him, in acknowledgment of—what? Ambassadors bowed this way only to kings!

Mother of the Fertile Loins, who was this man who had suddenly come vaulting over her garden wall two nights ago?

Fellow ruler, Amenotep named him. What king was there so powerful that his appearance could cause such a change in these proud men? What king would visit her kingdom unannounced with only a soldier as his guard? With a trembling hand, Balkis reached out for her wine goblet and lifted it to her mouth.

Over its golden rim, her eyes regarded Solomon. Astarte guide her wits! Baal govern her tongue, lest it babble foolishly in her amazement! What could she say to this man who was so much at ease, so kingly?

Solomon felt laughter struggling to pass his lips as he gestured at the three Egyptians. "Shall we dismiss them, Sheba?" he asked.

Balkis swallowed and found her tongue at last. "Yes, yes. Of course. You are dismissed!"

She came to her sandaled feet and stood with the backs

of her knees pressing against the low edge of her gold dining couch. A flush was rising in her cheeks. Her heart had not thudded like this since the first time she had been initiated into the mysteries of the goddess Astarte by the high priest at the temple altar.

Solomon swept forward, his long red cloak swaying gently to his stride. When he was a yard from her side he turned and waved toward Benajah. "The captain of my armies, Sheba. My companion in adventure, here in your kingdom."

Benajah bowed and Balkis undid a ring from her finger that was worth ten lowland farms and tossed it to him. "We welcome your captain to our kingdom, as—as we welcome you."

Solomon leaned forward so that he could whisper. "Shall we dismiss them all, my little bathing girl, so we can be alone?"

Balkis bit her lip, flushed, and nodded. The laughter that was suppressed in Solomon was beginning in her throat as she met his bright eyes. They waited side by side until the dining hall was empty of everything living but themselves, with the silver lamp stands guttering, throwing yellow radiance across the low couches and dining tables.

They erupted together, their laughter rising full and unchecked, as Balkis took a step forward and fell against him, clinging. After a while she lifted her face, cheeks damp with tears of laughter.

"They were so proud and haughty, those unburied old mummies, until they saw you! What did you do that made them jump up and bow like wooden toys from Thebes? Are you a magician? Can you work magic with a look? You knew them, too. You called each one of them by name!"

"I've met them before, at the court of Siamon. They remembered me."

Her glance was sly. "Men like that don't bow to ordinary people. You must be a very great man in your own country."

Solomon chuckled, and told her who he was.

"Solomon?" she gasped, drawing back a step. "King of Israel? The man who's so wise everybody makes up jokes about him? The man who sends riddles to Hiram of Tyre? Riddles he can't answer, and so pays a rich forfeit to your treasury?"

"It's one way of making money." He grinned. "Even kings must have their little enjoyments. It's become a habit with us. As Egyptians play at draughts, so we play at conundrums."

Balkis turned and crossed the tiled floor to the low table set before her dining couch. As she reached for her goblet of thin, beaten gold she said, "A king! I entertained a king the other night in my gardens, and I didn't know it!"

"A royal welcome it was, I assure you."

She caught the laughter in his eyes and giggled, holding the goblet against her bosom. "I should be angry. When a woman gives herself to a man because of Astarte, he's supposed to be a stranger. Now—"

Solomon shrugged. "I was a stranger at the time. Now I'm a friend, a fellow ruler."

Balkis finished the wine and set the goblet down. Her blood was in a ferment. The events of the night were still with her, in a faint aftermath of surprise. Her mind had not adjusted to the fact that her anonymous lover was a king whose nation was as powerful as her own. She felt confusion and uncertainty.

From under her long black lashes she looked at him, waiting for his words to give her a clue as to her conduct. But Solomon was silent, almost morose. It seemed to the woman that he had forgotten her presence.

Then his gray eyes lifted from the golden leg of her dining couch to regard her steadily.

"Are you an ambitious woman, Sheba?" he asked abruptly.

The question took her by surprise. "Why, I—I don't know. Isn't every ruler ambitious?"

He smiled wryly. "Siamon of Egypt is not ambitious. He collects carvings of river boats, and amuses himself by racing them one against the other in the Nile lagoons. Some of them are marvels of accuracy, by the way. But that is the hobby of a man content with his world. Are you that content?"

Balkis grew aware that he probed her spirit, as a chirurgeon probed the flesh for pain. She sat on the edge of the couch and crossed her legs, idly swinging a foot. "Until the other night, I was anything but content. I hated sitting on my throne and listening to dotards whine in my ears about what to do about high taxes, or how many men I need in my armies, or what terrible things were going to happen to me because Egypt was sending three new ambassadors to talk trade treaties. No, I was not content."

Her eyes were almost shy as they studied him, standing spraddled-legged before her with his hands clasped behind his back. "Now, however, I'm not so sure of myself. I tell you frankly, I've never met a man like you. You're like a fresh wind off the sea, bringing new things with you, as the wind brings new ships to my ports. I ask myself, why have you come into my life? And I don't know."

His fist came down hard into his cupping palm. "I can tell you why, Sheba. As I can tell you why those three Egyptians were dismayed at the sight of me."

She stirred. "I wondered at that."

"They didn't see only the King of Israel. Their eyes are trained to look behind faces and in back of words, to discover true meanings, true emotions. They saw us both, side by side. And they didn't like what they saw!"

Solomon was discovering that he could not forget his kingship, that even in this Sheban palace with this woman before him he must think of Jerusalem and his people. His mind was concerned with their welfare and their safety, and perhaps with their future glory: the glory he might bring them. He supposed that all kings carried this invisible scepter around with them, to weigh down their every waking moment. The astonishment of the three Egyptians had been the fuel that stirred this strange inner excitement that was filling him now with such triumph.

"Don't you see?" he asked. "They saw us, you and I. Sheba and Israel, side by side! Why was I here in your kingdom? To make trade agreements with you? To weld your navy and my army into the most powerful fighting force on earth? They know already that Hiram of Tyre is my friend, and that Tyrian ships control the Inland Sea."

He crossed and sat by her side, putting out a hand to rest it on her thigh. His exultation was contagious. Balkis found herself responding to it. Her hand came onto his, holding it tightly.

"My own ships control the southern waterways, from Punt to India," she said proudly, beginning to see at last the direction of his thoughts. "My sailors walk as free men in their cities. No man dares to attack them, for fear of Sheba's vengeance!"

Solomon said thoughtfully, almost dreamily, "Tyre and Jerusalem and Sheba! Three cities that might control the world!"

Balkis found breathing difficult. She knew something of geography. It was part of the training of young rulers. Her mind went probing as she stared up at Solomon, trying to read his thoughts through his clear gray eyes. She whispered, "You and I and Hiram of Tyre rule those cities. Solomon—come with me!"

She took him by the hand and drew him out of the dining chamber and along a narrow corridor whose tall columns were painted in bright blues and reds. The palace was quiet at this hour of the night. Only their sandaled feet and the sputtering wall torches made any sound. The corridor opened out onto a vast audience room which was completely empty.

At one end of the pillared room was a stepped throne, of black ebony and yellow gold, with the dragon seal of Sheba carved into the solar disc inset in its back. In wall niches on either side of the throne were two great statues: that of the mother goddess, Astarte, and of Bel-Marduk, with his feet on the side of dead Tiamat.

Two oil stands stood on either side of the one wall, which was set with colored tiles in the form of a great map. By the reddish glow of the blazing oil they could see the peninsula of Arabia, and the purple tiles that marked its southwestern tip for the land of Sheba. Above it, and along the Red Sea coast, was the land of Ophir; beyond that, the red Syrian desert ran between Israel and the lands of Babylon and Assyria. Egypt and the Nile lay below the pale-blue Inland Sea.

Solomon and Balkis came to stand before the map. Solomon lifted an arm and pointed. "You can draw a straight line from Sheba north to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem on to Tyre. That line cuts the caravan routes of every nation but our own.

"By uniting, we could deny trade between Egypt and the land of Shinar, between Persia and Assyria and Babylon. Tyre's ships could isolate Greece. What other countries are left?"

Sheba felt excitement swell her veins. Almost breathlessly she followed his pointing finger to the tiled wall map. Yes, yes. It was as he said. Sheba and Jerusalem and Tyre had it in their power to control the world.

"Ships from Tyre and ships from Sheba on the seas!

Your armies on the land!" she whispered. "The united powers of three strong kingdoms, locked together!"

With this man, there was no boredom of treatymaking, no weariness of long hours spent listening to old men mumbling their theories into her ears. Like the arrow from the bow, he went straight to his target, revealing the clearness of his thinking. He threw up no barriers of distance and uncertainty. His confidence fed her own. No old man, this, worrying more about his health than about the welfare of her kingdom! Solomon made royalty an exciting game.

"My father consolidated his hold on his kingdom. I will expand it. In my royal arsenal at Megiddo I've been collecting war chariots, bought cheaply from Egypt in these times of peace. My treasurers have been storing up money taken as taxes from my merchants. David's treasure coffers are now my own."

Balkis sensed a little of the destiny that walked stride for stride with Solomon. It shone from his bright gray eyes and sat squarely on his wide shoulders. He swung on her abruptly, seeming to tower higher in royal majesty the longer he spoke.

"My armies can smash any army sent against them. I know this, as surely as I know we stand in your palace hall. And do you know why? Because fate sent me a weapon! It was a sign, Sheba. A sign!"

He walked from her, moving into the shadows beyond the oil stands and back, restless, vital. Her flesh had known his bodily strength; now her mind was learning the quality of his spirit. As his red cloak swung to his movements, Balkis pictured it as imperial purple, and her imagination put a golden crown on his head and a scepter in his hand. Royal lover! Royal ruler!

"Do you know why I came so far from my own land, Balkis? To find that weapon, and make it my own. I found it here in Sheba, even as I found you. A weapon

and a woman. One alone is more than most men could hope for in a thousand lifetimes. Both of you mean the world!"

He came and stood close to her, reaching out as if to assure himself that she existed. As his hands went up and down her arms, she shivered, understanding that Solomon was offering her more than love. He was giving her a chance to sit a high throne and rule the earth. What was it she had thought of queenship two nights ago, before this tall man had come into her garden and her life? A boring chore. An endless succession of exhausting conferences and wearisome advisers. She wanted to laugh and cry and dance gaily down the tiled floor of the great audience hall. Her eyes were being opened at last to the magnificence of kingship, and she liked what she saw.

"Am I too ambitious?" he asked softly, smiling a little. "Have I made too much of what you mean to me? Of what we can mean to each other?"

"No! Oh, no! You're teaching me what it means to be a king. And a queen!"

"Destiny," he whispered, staring off down the hall at the closed doors of bronze and dark boxwood. "We are ruled by destiny, you and I. But there comes a time in the life of a ruler when he must choose to rule that destiny in his turn, or let it govern him, like a slave under the millstone's yoke. Which shall it be for us, Sheba?"

"We shall rule it! Our hands united have the power to do so!"

"Yes, we have the power. And the will, I think. Do we have the endurance?"

Balkis bit her lip. "By that you mean, will we carry through the plans we make so easily? Do we have the stuff of a Rameses or a Tiglath Pileser of Assyria in our blood?" She stood closer to him, so that she rested her softness against his length. Her head fell back and her bright eyes stared up at him feverishly. "We could, Solomon! We

could give each other that strength and that endurance. Love between us would do that. Love me, as you have taught me to love you!"

She was royal Sheba in her thin byssus tunic, through which the ivory tint of her flesh was visible, with the broad jeweled collar above her full, thrusting breasts. Costly pearls winked in the lamplight on her bare toes. Fabulous diamonds gleamed at her fingers where they held his forearms. This woman could offer him the world, with Hiram of Tyre. Union with Sheba would make him master of the earth.

His hands moved down her back, stroking her soft warmth beneath the Egyptian linen. He whispered, "Poets and madmen have babbled of love for centuries. Until now, I never knew what they meant. Their words were only pretty sounds."

Leaning forward and standing on her toes, Balkis lifted her red mouth to his. "I will teach you love, Solomon, and you will teach me statecraft."

They kissed until their bodies were smoldering fires calling out to each other as they sought to join. His voice was a song in her ears that made her head grow so heavy it dropped back and stared sightlessly at the ceiling, banded to him only by his arms.

Balkis felt herself caught up in a swirling windstorm of the senses. No *belat* that had ever swept across the rooftops of her city was as fierce as this pounding that held her in its grip. She could only twist a little and moan, and discover that the wisdom of the flesh she had learned in the gynacaseums of Astarte was a cold, unemotional thing compared to this limp breathlessness.

The golden-legged wall couch was wide and roomy. Its cushions cradled her as she drew Solomon into her arms. The thin byssus tunic tore from her wide jeweled collar to her ringed toes, and his lips replaced it. With his madness and his hunger he swept her up with him into a

world of frenzied delight and of joy that could only be babbled wordlessly, as the eyes rolled and damp hair clung to silken cushions.

Much later, when the oil stands were sputtering and their bluish flames were half hidden by the bronze bowls that held them, so that the audience chamber was a place of dark shadows and the painted walls were illumined only here and there in the blackness, Balkis of Sheba stirred gently.

She rose to an elbow, bending above the tranquil face of this royal lover who had stirred her as no other man had ever done. Gently she touched his lips with her fingertips. Carefully she smoothed his curly black ringlets from his wide brow.

"Solomon, King of Israel, my love," she whispered, and, leaning forward, touched her lips softly to his cheek.

From the floor she drew his borrowed red cloak and covered him, then went to stand before the tiled map of the world, remembering his fiery words as vividly as her body recalled his flaming caresses. Lazily she stretched her arms high above her head. I am royal Sheba! she told herself. Soon to be queen of the earth and the seas, and ruler of every living man and woman in all its teeming cities! This man sleeping under my borrowed red cloak can give me all these things, as I can give him love.

Never in her life had she found a man she wanted to wed, standing before the high priest and the altar of Astarte, kneeling to receive the flower garland, and writing her name on the scroll where the names of the rulers of Sheba were kept for posterity. No man had ever challenged her womanliness as Solomon had done. No man could bring her more by marriage than she could bring him, except Solomon.

A little shiver made her realize that she stood naked in the long, dark audience hall. With that chill came the

thought that this man might not think her fit to be his queen. He would give her the earth, but what could she give him in return? Was love enough? Was her love enough?

"Aie! Love like a madness," she told the silence, whispering the words into the great, dim hall. "A very insanity of love! I will make him a part of me so that he will be unable to forget my beauty and my art. I will hold him through his need for me, which will be greater for him than anything else on the face of the earth!"

On hennaed feet, she tiptoed back to him.

Chapter Five

THE TWO CHARIOTS went at the gallop along the hard-packed sands that flanked the waters of the Red Sea. These were small racing chariots of gold and ivory, each of them drawn by three matched stallions. The dragon crest of Sheba glittered from their paneling and from the hubs of their spoked wheels.

Solomon shouted his glee. Slowly but steadily his team of dappled grays was pulling away from the bays that were harnessed to Balkis' chariot pole. The sea wind was in their faces, flapping his red cloak high in the air behind him, plastering the short Grecian chiton that Balkis wore against her thighs and middle. That wind was like a welcoming hand, beckoning him forward. The pound of the waves against this strip of Sheban coast seemed a voice crying out its delight at sight of him.

"Solomon! Solomon! Wait. Wait for me!"

He turned, shaking his whip high over his head, grinning back his triumph at the woman whose body was loosening the strict bonds of his spirit. A laxness was taking hold of Solomon these last few days, a psychic decomposition of the fibers of his manhood and will.

What surprised him most was the fact that he did not care. Jerusalem and Nathan and Zadok were far away, and the air was scented sweetly in Sheba, and its foods were spicy and its wines sweet. Its pagan queen was an ardent young woman who seemed to live only to please him.

Even as she feasted him with mutton and lamb that was heavily garnished with honey and leeks, and roast sausage covered with pears and apples, so she fed him also

with the beauty of her body. To Solomon, Balkis of Sheba was a woman of many moods. For him, in the warm spring nights on the terrace above her palace apartments, she played the slave girl, wearing only sandals, with her loose black hair floating down her back. At other times, seated on the small ebony footstool beside her wide divan, she became the queen she was, haughty and imperious, until her tactics roused him to such a frenzy that he loosed the strength of his muscles, tearing her garments from her. Sometimes she was a young girl, frightened and awed by his manhood. Again, she aped the temple harlots with such a display of abandonment that she swept him with her into the vortex of madness.

Day by day, and night after night, Balkis made herself a part of his life, so that he could refuse her nothing. As well deny the appetite of his stomach or the muscles in his arms!

The chariot rocked under his feet, bringing him back to this moment of its bouncing over a stretch of shells and pebbles. Then the wheels drove into wet sand and the horses lost speed, floundering. Their escort was far behind them, and Kabesh was man of the world enough to keep the troops at a good distance.

Solomon laughed. "I can run myself at a faster pace than this!" he cried, and flung the reins aside.

With a hand on the chariot rail, he vaulted it and made for Balkis' chariot. With a bound he was beside her, laughing, pulling her loose from the corded leather reins she had wrapped about her waist to give her muscles added weight against the hard tug of the three stallions in the traces.

Her body was warm and wet with perspiration as he held her clutched against him. Bright black eyes, set in shadowing malachite, smiled and answered his unspoken challenge.

"The sun is warm, Balkis," he whispered. "The ocean

looks cool. I've never been in salt water. Teach me what it's like."

A hand loosed his red cloak so that it fell behind him. He wore only the short Greek chiton, belted with leather studded with silver crescents, from which hung a short dagger. Sheba followed his example, dropping her purple robe in the sand, until she too wore only the scant charioteer tunic.

Hand in hand, they ran across the sand to the very edge of the water.

Here Balkis paused and held him back with a hand spread on his chest. Her eyes were very bright. There was a subdued excitement in her that showed itself in the parted lips and in the breath that came more swiftly.

"Before a ship takes to the waves for the first time, we of Sheba offer sacrifice to Ea. Let me offer sacrifice for you, Solomon!"

Solomon hesitated. A dedication to Ea was an invocation to a pagan god. Bright in Solomon's mind was the tale of the golden calf that Aaron had made when his people fled from Egypt, as Moses prayed to Yahweh on the cloudy peaks of Mount Sinai. There shall be no gods before Me! was the thundering law of Yahweh. Moses had shattered that calf in his righteous anger, with the twin tablets of stone perched on his shoulder.

And yet Balkis was so tempting, here before him.

"Please me, Solomon! Just a little blood, scattered in the water!"

A little blood, a few drops of salt water!

Balkis came against him so that he could feel the division of her thighs and the strength of her hard breasts. Laughing red lips and faintly worshiping eyes pleaded with him, her palms clutched to his arms. The salt wind and a touch of sea spray was in the air. He was in Sheba now, not in Jerusalem.

"Lambs and goats are sacrificed to Ea before we float

a ship," she whispered. "A little of their blood and a bit of salt water is mixed and thrown to the winds, which are the voices of Ea."

She read assent in his silence and crowded closer against him. Her small white teeth bit into the flesh of his upper arm, deeply. The pain of that savage bite made him quiver, but he forced himself to stillness, feeling her fingertips pressing the flesh, making the blood ooze out. Then her left palm was rubbing the blood into her palm and she was bending, scooping salt water into her right hand, mingling it with the blood.

She whirled and threw the liquid mixture into the air.

The sunlight caught it and made the drops glow brightly, red and silvery, before they showered into the sea.

"This man is yours, Ea, god of wind and god of sea! Cherish him. Give him safe journeys across your watery roads. Grant him the wisdom and the knowledge of your ways."

A dark cloud blotted out the sun. Lifting his eyes, Solomon saw the day become suddenly gloomy and overcast. Yahweh! Yahweh! he whispered in his mind, and the moisture of his flesh grew suddenly dry and cold.

Balkis touched him with her hand, and the cloud was gone, and the sun came out. Now the day was warm again, and hot, and the sand under his feet was an invitation to try the waves that pounded restlessly against its curving slope.

"Come, Solomon! Come swim with me!"

Like the nereid she resembled, with her silken chiton plastered to her smooth white thighs and hips, she tempted him step by step into the warm, embracing waters. Her laughter was all around him, her hand soft in his fingers. She coaxed and cajoled until he dived deep into the greenish sea, and swam as he had learned to swim years before in the waters of the Sea of Chinnereth.

For over an hour they played and swam lazily, cooling

the heat of their bodies. More than once in the water Sheba kissed and caressed him, like a priestess of Ea at the ritual sacrifices. There was a gloominess in Solomon, born of that moment of sacrifice to Ea and the dark cloud that followed. As if suspecting this, she made herself into a plaything of the sea and wind, stripping off her chiton and hurling it onto the sand in a soggy, crumpled ball, diving and sporting all around him, crying out for him to join her play.

And the magic of the sun and the sea and this ivory woman worked their spell. He lost his gloominess and laughed, chasing and catching her, losing her when his hand slipped off her wet flanks, only to follow and grasp her again.

Later he carried her onto the sloping beach and lowered her to his great red cloak. He stood a moment, breathing heavily, staring down at her, before her whispered words and outstretched arms drew him down beside her.

Balkis was no ordinary woman.

The loneliness of her life had disappeared before these days and nights that were filled with the presence of this tall, dark man from Israel. No longer need she stand at a recessed stone window of a palace wall, wrapped in a fringed Babylonian shawl, staring blindly and yearningly out into the night, needing a cure for the sickness of spirit that fed like a sore in her middle. Now she had that cure, and she bound it to her flesh as a chirurgeon tied a poultice to a wound.

Solomon was king of Israel!

Solomon offered her the world!

Some women might rest with this, but Balkis could never be content with what she held in her own two hands. An inner fire drove her on, to guard against its loss. The meetings that she held with the ambassadors of Egypt, with the consuls of Media and Babylonia and the

lands that lay to the south, below the city of Perseopolis, were only the outward signs of an inner restlessness. Even as her army captains ranged the hills, guarding against attacks on the fertile lowlands by bands of armed nomads, so she patrolled the ramparts of her pride, to prevent a destruction of what was already her own.

Her polished silver mirrors told her eyes that she was lovely. Not content with that beauty, she must add to it with perfumed byssus and transparent gauzes of varied colors, through which her flesh gleamed like pearls scattered in scarlet smoke or yellow mist. Fabulous jewels glittered on her fingers and her toes. Ropes of rubies were blood drops on her bosom and green emeralds girdled the smooth hips that swayed under diaphanous Egyptian linens.

There was more to a man like Solomon than his body, though her womanly instincts told her the flesh of him must be catered to, and pleased, until her body became a drug to him. His spirit, too, must be enslaved.

Balkis was a subtle woman.

No words were ever spoken that would make this man suspect what she plotted. As she had teased him into the sacrifice to Ea by the sands of the Red Sea, so she laughed him into wearing a golden image of Astarte for which she herself had posed. It was a perfect miniature of Balkis in gold, six inches high, carved and molded by an artisan from Ophir.

The night she showed him the little statue was damp and stormy. A wet *seistan*, that blustery Arabian wind of storm and destruction, was bringing the rain in thick gusts up from the stone wharves and across the domed rooftops of the city, surging into open gardens and paved porticos. Slim fig trees bent before the *seistan*, as worshipers bent to Baal in the temples. Solomon came with his cloak whipping across his great chest, springing from the ivory chariot that was Balkis' gift, shouting for dry clothes,

laughing down the storm. He was himself a storm, Balkis thought, watching him advancing on her where she awaited him in the draped magnificence of her bedchamber.

Fires were lighted in the iron tripod braziers. Torches flared along the stone walls. A warmth pervaded the little chamber, shutting out the rain that beat against the closed bamboo shutters, showering a redness of fire flame on white stone walls and wide divan, where the cushions lay piled in studied disorder.

Balkis awaited him in the dark shadows formed by a brazen moon gong and a votive altar. She stood cloaked in darkness, knowing he could see her body only as a darker blackness in the shadows.

The slave girl who ushered Solomon to her bedchamber bowed out of the room and left him staring at her.

"Take the wall torch nearest you, Solomon, my lover!"

He plucked it down and strode forward, holding the light high. The shadows fled before that bright redness, and left her standing naked before him, in the pose that Astarte assumed when she offered herself to her worshipers.

Solomon stood frozen, his eyes bright.

She was a fabled succubus in the red light. Her thighs were shaven smooth. Her rounded hips glistened like tinted pearl. Black hair lay across her shoulders, and the mouth that smiled at his adoration was a wet red fruit beneath the imperiously slim nostrils.

"If I could only keep you like that, inside me all the time!" he whispered fiercely.

"I am Astarte!"

"You are a woman! The woman I love!"

Balkis laughed softly and melted from her rigid pose. Her palms clapped and two Nubian women came running with a woolen *khalak*, which they wrapped about her slim body. Then she was striding forward, smiling up at him.

"Did you mean it, Solomon? Would you always want me with you, like that?"

He laughed and reached for her, but she slid aside, evading his arms. Her bare feet made no sound on the tiled floor as she whirled away from him and toward a huge sandalwood chest that held a jeweled coffer.

"Always!"

Balkis whirled and reached for the coffer. The top came off and her hand went inside, lifting out a gold statuette. She held it up. It was a golden duplicate of her body as it had stood in the shadows while he stared at her.

"Take it, then! Wear it always around your throat!"

It did not come to Solomon until much later that this was an image of the goddess Astarte that he pledged himself to wear, not just a figurine of the woman he loved. The ritual pose, the raw lust with which the goddess summoned her devotees to her worship were caught forever here in yellow gold. It was Balkis, Queen of Sheba, who posed so wantonly, but her identity was submerged in the greater meaning of the goddess she simulated.

From the coffer, Balkis drew a strong golden chain. Threading it through a tiny loop in the top of the statue, she lifted it over Solomon's head and settled it about his throat, so that it hung down on his chest. Then she opened her robe and pressed against him, and her mouth held a flame as warm as any that blazed in the brass braziers.

She was a clever woman, too.

Her audience hall was filled with her courtiers, with the consuls of Medea, and with the grim ambassadors from Egypt on the morning when she deferred her own judgment to that of Solomon. More than once that morning she had caught the almost defiant glances of the Medes and Egyptians as they rested on the regal figure of the King of Israel, who sat the great throne of Sheba beside her. Where her father had sat in judgment, there sat Solomon.

The bronze bull of Baal was at his left hand, the silver dove of Astarte at his right. Behind him the carven magnificence of the ebony dragon that was the symbol of the Sheban state rose towering into the air. Nubian slaves formed a phalanx before him. A file of tall desert soldiers, clad in bronze helmets and bronze corselets, ranged along the curving wall, spears ready in their hands.

To Balkis, he made an exciting figure. His royal robes, thick with crusted gold and set with jewels, could disguise but not entirely hide the strength of his tall body. His curling black hair, sprinkled with silver dust, was set with a thin gold diadem that her father had worn on these state occasions.

Balkis leaned toward him, smiling, a hand resting on his forearm.

"Give your judgment, Solomon! How would you deal with the problem?"

The dispute lay between a merchant from the Street of the Garment Sellers and a mercenary soldier in the service of the palace guard. On certain facts they were agreed: The soldier had stopped by the stall of the merchant to purchase a scarf of Kushite workmanship for a tavern woman. On learning the price of the *khalak*, the soldier had quarreled with the merchant.

It was then that they differed in their accounts of what took place.

The merchant advanced, bowing slightly, little used to being in royal throne rooms. He was an elderly man, with a straggling gray beard and a permanent limp. He spoke in a thin, reedy voice that seemed puzzled at its own temerity.

"Your worships, it is true we had words together. Angry words. I summoned two of my slaves and had the man thrown out into the street. He picked himself up and walked off, calling back insults as he went. That was the end of it, I thought. Every day I have such quarrels with

his kind, who seek gold lanterns for the price of clay lamps.

"Scarcely an hour ago he returned, with several of his fellow guardsmen. He accused me of putting my dogs on him. For that I have been brought before you."

The old man wriggled backward, as if he would lose himself in the crowd that pressed around to hear the decision of this strange king who sat beside their Balkis. With a loosely dangling sleeve, he wiped beads of moisture from his forehead. His eyes were terrified as he stared around him at the cold, unfeeling faces.

The mercenary was a big Sheban browned by the desert sun and scarred with the marks of a dozen campaigns. He blustered as he came striding forward, swaggering, and throwing the folds of his cloak back over a heavy shoulder.

"My name is Baram. What the old man says is true up to a point. But when we quarreled—and who would not quarrel over the price of a silver drachma for a mere length of Egyptian silk?—he did not call his slaves, but his dogs! Big hounds, with teeth as long as small daggers. They leaped on me and bit me, and spilled my blood. For that I am demanding satisfaction."

Solomon heard all the facts, and the argument of a fellow soldier. He leaned forward, smiling faintly, staring at the mercenary.

"There were no witnesses?"

"None at all, Your Highness. It's my word against his."

"And I'm to decide which of you speaks truth, and which lies. Tell me, Baram, have you come directly from the stalls of the merchant? Have you gone to your room, or to the antechambers off the corridors below?"

"No, Your Highness. I came directly here from the shop of Micah ben-Ahram, pausing neither to take food nor to drink wine."

Solomon smiled faintly. "Then you did not change your

clothes? You came directly, you said, no doubt in your anxiety to see justice done?"

The soldier smirked. "Exactly, Your Highness! Going to the corner of the Street of the Garment Sellers, after the dogs had torn my flesh, I summoned some of my fellow guards patrolling the avenues. They arrested Micah ben-Ahram and brought us here together."

Balkis leaned forward, eyes bright.

"Which man lies, Solomon?" she asked.

Her attitude challenged the wisdom that was his gift from Yahweh. As if they were mirrors reflecting the attitude of their queen, her courtiers and ladies in waiting crowded forward, brushing past the soldier and the merchant. Their jeweled hands came up, gesturing.

"Which man, which man?"

"Point out the liar!"

"Without witnesses, no man can say which of them speaks truth!"

Their voices caught at the edges of his pride, keening it. Their faces were flushed with triumph. They had him in a vise of uncertainty, daring him to expose this fine wisdom of his, which was a byword from Philistia south into Persis. Let their queen exult in the cleverness of this man she had taken as her lover, if she could! Women who exposed their flesh in low-cut robes, whose mouths were painted red and their eyelids blue, and men whose paunches shook beneath expensive fringed shawls yelled their challenge.

Solomon stared at them a moment, reflecting that men and women were the same everywhere. They feared his wisdom, and in their fear they grew abusive. He had seen men and women in Jerusalem act like this, when his own people came before him for his judgment.

Balkis frowned a little, drawing back. Had she miscalculated? Was this case as indecipherable to Solomon as it was to her? What cruel instinct had made her turn to

him in her bewilderment? The thought had been in her mind to prove to Sheba the brilliance of this man who shared her throne today, when she asked his help. Now . . .

Solomon raised his hand and laughed softly.

"The man is a stupid fool, and a poor liar. He insults the intelligence of your queen with his request."

They drew back a little at his words, feeling the confidence that beat in him, like the very blood in his veins. One man, a courtier from Ophir, which paid Sheba tribute in these days, scowled and thrust himself forward.

"Easy words to say, Solomon! But which man is the liar? And can you prove it?"

"Sooner or later a man is caught by his own lies. There is no need to prove it. Let him show you again where the hounds bit him."

The soldier swaggered forward, undoing the laces that held his shirt tied at the throat. Shrugging a shoulder from the brown wool, he held out his left arm, showing the recently caked blood. "This is where the hounds bit me! Look again, people of Sheba. Is a soldier to suffer such treatment at the hands of a foreign merchant?"

"No! No!" they cried loudly.

"Solomon, who lies?"

"We have seen the wounds! What do they prove?"

Solomon stood and smiled. Graciously he turned and offered his hand to Balkis who came to her feet beside him, uncertain and somehow afraid.

"The hounds that bit Baram must be very skillful with their teeth, indeed, to inflict such bites without tearing the tunic sleeve that covered his arm at the time! By his own testimony he came directly to the palace from the stall of Micah ben-Ahram. He neither ate nor drank nor changed his garments. Ask him how he inflicted the cuts. With a dagger? Or a sharp pin?"

The soldier went white. His tongue came out to lick dry lips, and there was vivid fear in his wide eyes. "Mercy,"

he whimpered, reading the death that sat in the glittering eyes of Balkis. "Mercy!"

The courtiers and their ladies were silent, a little awed. Now that Solomon had pointed out the fact, they themselves saw the flaw. The anger they felt at their own stupidity was now turned against the mercenary. Before Solomon or Balkis could move to save him, slim daggers were buried in his back. Screaming, he went to his knees, falling onto the mosaic flooring. A woman straddled him, her needle-thin hair dagger redly wet with his blood as she drove it into his neck again and again.

A man cried out, "This is Sheba's justice!"

Sickened by the sight, Solomon drew Balkis down and away from the twin thrones.

From that day on, Solomon was hailed throughout the city as a man apart. The wisdom of Baal and Astarte resided in his heart. There were some, even, who gave credit to the God he worshiped, this Yahweh of the Israelites. Crowds gathered when he went through the streets in his ivory chariot, or rode in the ebony litter behind drawn hangings, with Sheba at her ease beside him. Everywhere he went, he was cheered and honored.

The torches glowed red against the black marble walls of the palace dining hall as the serving women brought large golden platters between the low tables toward the raised dais, where Solomon reclined beside Balkis. Steam rose from the freshly sliced lamb that was fragrant with melting honey, and from the sea shrimp and oysters and fish fragrant in bubbling beans and lentils trimmed with garlic and onions.

In the open space between the tables, where the floor was formed of large glazed tiles fitted to form a sea wave and a galley, two naked women twisted together, posturing and gesturing in the rites of a dance as old as Ur. The guests—scented nobles and their scantily clad court wom-

en—encouraged the dancers with voice and gesture, inciting them to even more libidinous contortions.

Solomon was aware that Balkis leaned into him with a curving haunch, soft and warm, and that her laughter was close to his ear, where her lips moved lazily, whispering of forbidden things. With her ringed hand she brought a golden goblet to his lips, bidding him drink deep of the red Arsinoite wine it held.

"My people like you, Solomon. Drink and join our play!"

Her cajolery, like the posturings of the women in the open space below, was calculated to appeal only to his senses, Solomon knew. A pagan licentiousness lay upon this land like a bath of hot water, enervating and debilitating. Something inside him clamored against it, seeking to thrust it from him, knowing its danger. Grow to like this sensuality and you will become one of them, he told himself. Like that perfumed noble whose hand reached out to catch an ankle of one of the dancing women and drag her down on top of him.

He watched the woman press against the man, watched while the man responded. The other woman laughed shrilly and came to join them, and the three became a twisting bit of living statuary on the ivory dining couch.

Balkis caught his curling hair with clinging fingers, urging herself against him. "Do you grow jealous of Aneazar, Solomon? Would you trade places with him?"

Flushing, he said bleakly, "He's a fool, living only for his pleasures."

Her laughter mocked him tenderly. "While you live only to be king! Which of you is right, I wonder?"

"I'm no slave to my body!"

"By that you mean you're a cut above an animal. And yet the body can afford so many pleasures! Have you ever stopped to think just how many pleasures, Solomon? The taste of cleverly spiced food. The sweetness of honeyed

wine. The scents of a desert wind, or the salt air off the sea, or perhaps the warmth of a fragrant woman. The sight of a sunset on the rooftops. The sound of a lyre whose strings are plucked by an expert player." Her hands clasped his fingers and drew them under her loose tunic. "The feel of skin beneath the fingertips!"

Balkis moved lazily, smiling wet-lipped up into his gray eyes.

"Even if you own all the world, there are only the five senses to enjoy it," she whispered. A bare arm snaked up about his neck, drawing his face down to her lips. When she spoke now, her mouth caressed him. "Push me away, Solomon. Test your will against your senses!"

The eyes that were so bright under her long black lashes challenged him, just as did the warm flesh against which his palm rested beneath her tunic. Nathan would call Balkis harsh names, Solomon knew, and rant unceasingly against the philosophy that guided her actions. She lived for pleasure, and pleasure alone, these days. There was nothing she held back from him, and seemed only to urge both him and herself on to greater expenditures of energy.

For weeks he had been an honored guest in her marble palace. The feastings and the entertainment had been varied, and as each entertainment grew in sheer paganism, in exoticism of conception and fulfillment, he became more and more a part of her life. It was as if she sought, by the very ingenuity of her inventions, to forge a chain more binding to his spirit than the manacles of her dungeon had been to his body.

What surprised Solomon was the fact that he was proving such an eager guest.

With the curving body of Balkis fitted against his own, with his hand held beneath her tunic by her own slim fingers, Solomon knew that he was sinking deeper into this life of pagan licentiousness. He was like a swimmer caught in a strong ocean current, swept away from the rocks and

shoals of a familiar shore, outward into the uncharted wastes of the vast, endless sea that travelers said existed beyond the Pillars of Herakles. The golden statuette of Astarte lay against his skin, its chain tight on the nape of his neck. The teeth marks this woman had put in him those days before, when she had mingled his blood with the salt waters of the sea in worship of Ea, were as indelibly printed on his spirit as they were on his flesh.

A gigantic ebon figure towered high above the diners, set in an arching niche of the west wall: Baal the Great, god of men and animals and of all created things. Fire burned eternally in a bronze bowl before his image, on a slab of ivory that rested on golden legs. Beyond this idol was the seated figure of Melek, whom his own people knew as Moloch, into whose fiery maw children were thrown by the Sheban high priests.

Solomon studied the features of the god.

They were human, of course, for these were the animal gods of human beings, worshiped from the beginnings of all life by men who sought to find in their gods the strength and courage and high spirit that they themselves were lacking. Omnipotence and omniscience were attributes of their gods, powers that man himself did not possess. They were dream creatures to whom these pagans could turn when oppressed by forces they could not control. Heavily muscled, almost brutish in his bodily strength, Baal yet had a face chiseled with asceticism, to reflect the inner wisdom that his body denied.

Yahweh was the God of the spirit. He dwelt everywhere. His appeal was to that inner spirit of man by which he realized his own ineffectuality, his weaknesses, and the animal taint of sin that was in his inheritance.

These pagans of Sheba wasted themselves in orgiastic animal worship of their animal gods. Yahweh taught His people that by overcoming this animalistic side of his nature, man might prove to himself that the spirit is great-

er than the flesh. The flesh is mortal and will die. The spirit is immortal and will live forever.

Now Solomon was betraying his own God, for the pleasures of a pagan city.

Balkis stirred lazily. Her palm rose to stroke his cheek. A forefinger tickled his lips. "Do you grow bored with eating, Solomon? Are my dancers so inept that they cannot bring a gleam of interest to your eyes?"

"These things you worship are ephemeral. I was only realizing the fact."

Her eyes lidded over, revealing the green sheen of their lids and her long black lashes. "Nothing can last forever. Take pleasure while you can."

"A pagan philosophy. As well worship you or me as worship Baal or Astarte. All they offer a man is what a man already possesses."

Balkis drew away, sitting up. There was a sullen anger in her face. "My forefathers are descended from Baal himself, from his mating with a Sheban woman, centuries ago! I am a child of Baal!"

He grinned. "A child inherits the abilities of its parents or its forebears. Perform a miracle for me, Balkis. Ask your god to work a miracle."

"I'll do better than that. I grow tired myself of this eating!" She came to her feet easily, standing beside the low divan. Her hand reached down for him, to lift him up beside her.

Below the dais where the royal couch stood, the diners did not see them stand, or move together toward the fringed drapes that hid the narrow corridor by which they left the hall. The men and women below were too engrossed in the red wines that were being poured into silver goblets by naked slaves, and in the duck wings larded with honey, and in the contortions of the five women on the red carpet that had been unrolled on the flooring.

One last glance Solomon gave the long dining hall; then

he was moving with Balkis along the corridor between the standing tripods that held fire to light their way. Balkis was silent as they walked. Only her white leather sandals made any sound as they slapped the stone flaggings.

They came to a little antechamber fitted with shelves on which stood black onyx funerary vases and small alabaster burial houses. In these reposed the bones of the dead rulers of Sheba. The room was fitted with black hangings trimmed in sullen scarlet. Its walls were ebony, mounted in dull gold. Tall tripods of iron held red flames that gave the chapel a sepulchral gloom.

"A room filled with dead dreams, Solomon. This is the burial chamber of my ancestors."

His own people buried their dead in cave tombs or in hillside mausoleums. The Babylonians and Philistines, the Canaanites and Shebans gathered the bones of their deceased and set them inside tiny funerary vessels, sometimes shaped like little houses, with four legs and ridged roofs. The room was heavy with stale air, in which the standing lamps flickered fitfully. Solomon felt the weight of centuries pressing down upon him.

In the center of the room stood a low, horned altar. At the far end of the chamber was a statue of Astarte, carved in gleaming black basalt. The rubies that were its eyes glittered balefully where the votive fires lit them. Through some trick of the features, it seemed that she stared down directly at anyone in the room, no matter where he stood.

Balkis moved forward to the altar, reaching into a small golden dish that held powdery spikenard. With one hand she took a few pinches of the stuff and scattered it across the redly glowing coals in the shallow trough of the limestone altar. Sweet, thick clouds began to form in the small room like morning mists on Mount Gilboa.

"Join with me, Solomon. Offer incense for my ancestors."

The red eyes of the black statue stared coldly at him. Those blazing orbs brightened suddenly, as the lamp fires grew higher. They challenged him, staring unwinkingly: Worship me, stranger to Sheba! Worship Astarte, the mother goddess! As a woman can be gentle, I am gentle. As a woman can be loving, I am loving. I am all women, for I am a woman!

"No," said Solomon softly. "I will offer no incense to Astarte."

Balkis did not look at him. "You will please me, Solomon, by doing as I say. In this room we are alone. It is sacred to the family of the Sheba rulers. Any slaves who enter it for the sake of burial are afterward put painlessly to death. With my own hands I tend its sacred fires. Here none can see what you do."

"Yahweh can see."

"And this dream of world conquest? Are you to accomplish it without the aid of Sheba and her ships? Of Sheba and her queen? You scruple to avoid offering incense to Astarte, but you will spill the blood of her worshipers to get what you want!"

Solomon drew a deep breath. Ambition burned more brightly in his chest than did the flames in the iron tripods or the glowing coals on the altar. Yahweh knows I seek conquest only to glorify His name, he told himself. With such a goal to reach, he must make a concession here and there.

On sandaled feet he stepped forward. His hand went down into the golden dish. Between his forefinger and his thumb he gathered up a few grains of the spikenard and scattered them across the coals.

Balkis whirled and flung herself against him. Triumph lay deep in her wide, green-shadowed eyes. Her fingers were frantic, clutching at his arm.

"Together, Solomon. Together we can rule the world, as we rule today in Sheba. I have given you the throne

beside my own, and you are worthy of it! Worthy, too, to sit the throne that will some day rule our world!"

The red eyes of the black Astarte glared down at Solomon.

Dead, unthinking eyes.

Rubies.

Chapter Six

CANAAN WAS A LAND of pleasant river valleys and wide, level plains, of terraced farmlands and barren stretches of high hills crumpled in upon themselves. This was the land of milk and honey promised the Israelites by Yahweh, the land they found waiting for them when they came up out of Egypt, with Moses and Joshua leading them. For two hundred years the Israelites had been in Canaan, which they called Israel after crushing the walled cities of King Sihon and King Og of Bashan, after Jericho fell before Joshua, and Ai and Hebron, and others of the Canaanite cities.

The Israelites were a strong nation today. The seeds of ambition that stirred under Saul and David, blossomed into full bloom under Solomon. Now Jerusalem ruled a land that stretched from Philistia to the Red Sea, straddling the great crescent of fertility that arched from Egypt upward through Haran and curved down into Assyria and Babylonia.

And the man who sat the lion throne at Jerusalem ruled Israel.

Jothab, the brother of Solomon, would sit in that golden chair very soon now. Jothab told himself this with confidence as he walked the stone ramparts of the Philistine city of Gaza, where he was an honored guest. The fringed shawl and tunic that he wore in deference to his hosts swayed to his stride. There was exultation as well as confidence in Jothab this night. Inside the thick stone walls of his palace, King Omri of Gaza was even now seated with his ministers.

The question before the Philistine court was the aid

that Gaza would give Jothab against Solomon. For the past two centuries, Philistia and Israel had been deadly enemies. In recent years they had come to live in a sullen truce, based largely on economic considerations. The camel trains that left the sea city of Gaza heavily laden with dyed clothes and precious metals returned with Israelite gold and silver. Now King Omri saw a chance to strengthen his weakened cities by helping Jothab rule Jerusalem, and so form a beneficial alliance for his city-kingdom.

"I'll give him a slice of land around Hebron," Jothab whispered to the wind. "By marriage with his daughter Candia, I may even sit on his own throne one day and own everything."

Philistia and Israel united would be a kingdom strong enough to rival Egypt itself. And the dark and lovely Candia was sleekly voluptuous, with knowing eyes and a sensual mouth, and her full bodily contours gave promise of a warmly affectionate nature.

Of course, Naomi would not relish this marriage with a Philistine woman, but Jothab was secretly a little tired of his Benjamite wife. His marriage with Naomi, the daughter of Levi, who was a petty king under Solomon in Shiloh, had been a state affair, entered into at the order of his father, David, during the last year of his life. Jothab had entered into it willingly enough, for Naomi was a pretty thing, with white skin and heavy black hair, and her father was a rich man. She had brought him wealth and a measure of selfish devotion, but their marriage was childless. Jothab strongly suspected that she was barren, for his past amorous adventures with tavern maids and a court lady here and there had not proved fruitless.

"A king needs children to succeed him on his throne," Jothab told himself sullenly. He was too much the egoist to realize that what he wanted was a better bedmate than Naomi.

A soft footfall brought him around, away from the wind.

The moonlight glistened like wet silver on the eardrops and jeweled necklace of the woman who stood smiling at him. Candia of Gaza, heiress to the rich seaport cities of Gaza and Askalon and the inner strip of fertile farmland that was Philistia, had only recently come from her bedchamber, and wore a fringed Assyrian shawl over a tunic of Egyptian linen. Tiny silver bells on her slim ankles tinkled faintly as she half ran to meet him.

"Good news, Jothab! Good news!"

His arms opened to catch and hold her warm and solid against him. The rich Arabian perfumes that her slave maidens had worked into her hair were almost as stirring as the softness of the flesh his hands could feel through the fringed shawl and the linen tunic.

They kissed, straining against each other.

After a while Candia withdrew her lips to gaze deep into his eyes. She was a sophisticate, this woman, as were most pagans of her day, and realist enough to recognize the fact that this big, arrogant Israelite could offer her a throne that was even stronger than the one she would inherit.

"I've spoken to Father. He promises that if his advisers agree, he'll announce our marriage to the people. We can be married within the week, while Father gathers his armies from Askalon and Ashdod, and brings down the hill tribes from Gath to fight with them. The fact of our marriage will give Father a perfectly good excuse to help you against Solomon. He'll merely be championing you as his son-in-law and successor to the throne of Jerusalem, to which you are the rightful heir."

"Solomon has no right to it!" Jothab growled. "I'm older than he. I'm just as well fitted to rule. He's king only because his mother was my father's favorite. Bathsheba was a witch who put a spell on him!"

Candia scratched his throat lightly with her long, hennaed nails. "Only one thing worries Father. That's Nathan. The old prophet sides with Solomon. Father and his ad-

visers know how intensely religious all you Hebrews are. He's afraid Nathan and Zadok will find a way to keep you from the throne, even if he smashes Solomon."

Jothab smiled grimly. "When Solomon is dead, Nathan will need a strong man to rule the people. Where else will he turn but to me? With you and Philistia at my side, how can he deny me?"

"Solomon is not dead, though!"

Jothab hesitated. The ambition that burned in him, and which was as much a part of him as it had been a part of David, did not enable him to close his eyes completely to the fact that he had ordered two men south to kill his brother. Murder was a sin against Yahweh, and Jothab was not a man completely devoid of principles. These sleepless nights of late, when he lay heavy-eyed, staring into the darkness, and saw Nerkal plunging his dagger into a bloody Solomon, were living nightmares to him.

He debated now whether he should tell this woman who was to be his queen of the mission on which he had dispatched the Assyrian caravan trader. More than one ruler had come to power by assassination of his predecessor.

Yet something held Jothab back from the revelation that trembled on his tongue. There was a measure of slyness in Jothab, counseling him that a secret was safer in one head than in two. What he told Candia she might well tell King Omri.

"Don't worry your pretty head about Solomon," he said harshly. "He's in Sheba—this I know through friendly spies—and many things may happen to him before he returns to Jerusalem!"

Candia smiled wickedly. Lazily she pressed against Jothab, hearing his breath catch in his throat in response to her gentle movements. The fact that Solomon did not sit his lion throne was news to her, but she was clever enough not to betray the fact. Instead, she devoted herself to pleasing this man who would be her husband.

The calculated avidity of her kiss found a breathless response in him. His arms strained her to him until it seemed as if her ribs would crack, but the pagan Candia, so long used to the detached ardors of Philistine courtiers, found a pleasant savagery in such treatment.

"You hold secrets from me, my darling," she whispered at last.

"No secrets," he panted, aware that the blood pounded feverishly in his veins. "Except for those that might be unseemly for your ears."

"Silly Jothab!" Her laughter was musical. "You've sent men into Sheba to kill Solomon. I can read it in your eyes." It was a shrewd thrust, and Candia knew a thrill of triumph as he drew back a little in alarm. She went after him, her hips driving him into a deeper shadow. "A king is merciless, Jothab! It's one of the first things you have to learn, once you wear the crown of Israel."

He thought of Naomi, and shivered.

King Omri came from the wide, paved terrace along the wall, followed closely by a giant Nubian in leopard loincloth, gripping a huge battle-ax in a black hand. There was tremendous strength in the extraordinarily thick shoulders of the king of Philistia, which made him seem almost as wide as he was tall. Men said that in his younger days, Omri had broken the back of a bull during a display of bull-baiting.

A smile stood on his lips at sight of his daughter and the handsome Jothab. He was a gift from Astarte, this royal brother of the wise Solomon. His evident attachment for Candia, whose escapades were disturbing the even tenor of Omri's court and made his family a laughingstock in the taverns, to which she sallied forth under cover of darkness, and his perfect claim to the throne at Jerusalem made him more than a welcome guest. With Jothab as the figurehead on his bull-god standards, Omri could make Philistia into the power it had been before the coming of

Moses and Joshua, when his people had ruled all Canaan.

"Good news, Jothab," he called. "The council has approved our entire program." He did not wait for Candia and Jothab to part, but came into the shadows with them, smiling genially. "Tomorrow I make the announcement, while you two prepare yourselves for the wedding feast. You'll be wed a day later, at a propitious time to be decided on by the high priest of Dagon."

"And the army? The support you promised me?"

Even with Candia moving her soft thighs against him and with her long nails stroking the back of his neck, Jothab could still remember Solomon and the fact that he was proving a traitor to his own people. And yet he had no reason to justify his actions to himself. Absalom had rebelled against David. Adonijah set himself up in defiance of Solomon. Others gave him the example. He merely followed in their steps; haltingly, it is true, for he recalled vividly enough the fate that had come to Absalom and to Adonijah.

Candia traced his lips with a fingertip. "Tell him, Father. Then leave us. I want to show my future king of Israel what an entertaining wife he is taking to his bedchamber!"

Jothab felt a shiver ripple along his flesh. This Philistine woman was a harlot. His every judgment told him that: her green eyelids and painted mouth, the hennaed breasts she revealed so calculatingly through slits in the thin byssus tunic, even the manner in which she caressed and stroked him were proof enough. Yet that very immorality held him in thrall, as a bronze cage holds a captured panther.

Omri laughed.

"My captains already are on the road to Askalon and to Ashdod, to secure help. My armies are tented on the slopes of Mount Carmel, ready to march at a word from me. Spearmen in the number of two thousand. One thousand

archers. A thousand chariots! Seasoned veterans, all of them! And more coming!"

It was a good striking force, a compact wedge of steel and iron and flesh that could cut its way between Dothan and Samaria and over the mountain passes of Ebal before word would come to Jerusalem, only forty miles away. There would be no time to summon support from Megiddo, where Solomon stabled his chariots. Nathan and Zadok would be helpless against him.

Triumph was a thick, sweet honey in Jothab's veins.

He tightened the arm that held Candia against him. Over her heavy auburn hair, which was powdered heavily with gold dust, he stared down at Omri. "Philistia will strike from the south? Two thousand spearmen, I think you said? And another thousand chariots?"

"Enough men to smash any defense Solomon can muster."

Omri smiled lazily. The Philistines were a military power in these parts still, though they were not so strong as they had been in the days before David slew Goliath. Descendants of the sea kings of ancient Crete, they were workers in iron, and good fighting men. Their armor was highly prized from Egypt to the land of Medea, as were their swords and axes.

Jothab offered Philistia a chance to regain past glories, even as he offered it to Omri. Jothab did not know it, but Omri already had met with his captains and decided on his course of action.

They would aid Jothab to the throne. Candia would keep him content while Omri milked the Israelites of their gold and silver. Wealth would put Philistine galleys on the high seas again. No longer would Hiram of Tyre and his Phoenicians trade unmolested for Iberian tin and African ivory. Philistia and Canaan would grow strong, and—who knew but Dagon?—perhaps they would found a nation like Egypt, which would last forever!

Omri was satisfied, even delighted. He took care to hide it from this shrewd young Hebrew, but he could not restrain the laugh that bubbled thickly in his throat. "The day after tomorrow you wed, you two. Within the week we march on Jerusalem!"

Candia pouted. "You give us little time for pleasure, Father."

Omri grinned, meeting Jothab's bright eyes. "Enjoy yourselves now, then. There's work ahead! There'll be no time for kisses and caresses once we sight Jerusalem's walls."

The Nubian stepped to one side as Omri swung around and went past him, walking with his rolling gait. The Nubian followed him softly, like a great black panther.

Candia put her hands on Jothab and heard him moan. Eagerly she pressed closer, offering her mouth. "So little time, my darling. So little time!"

His hands were crushing her pleasantly. They lifted and held her high as his lips foraged into the cunning slits of her tunic, to find soft flesh.

"My bedchamber is empty, Jothab," she whispered. "Carry me there, and quickly! My blood bubbles like water in a cooking pot!"

The bedchamber that belonged to the daughter of Omri was wide and spacious. Filmy gauzes were hung from golden rods around a low divan in the middle of the room. Low cosmetic tables and sandalwood chests and coffers stood against the painted walls. A small votive altar was set in a recessed archway under the friezed image of Dagon, the god of all Philistia.

Candia writhed from him as the great oaken door clanged shut. She went dancing across the room toward the divan, dropping her fringed Assyrian shawl, sliding behind a pink veil that gave her the appearance of a giant pearl.

A hand loosed the ruby brooch at her left shoulder and

the byssus tunic she wore went sliding floorward. Jothab was aware that he breathed thickly, like a man running a race for his very life. White flesh bathed in pink! Slim thighs and rounded hips, and mocking laughter stirring a madness in him.

He ran for her, but she was gone.

When he saw her next, she was behind a blue gauze curtain, removing the silver pins that held her thick auburn hair, which was piled high in the Grecian manner, and coifed in a tail above the base of her neck. Now she was a water sprite, white behind dreaming blue.

"Candia! Candia, wait!"

He ran, only to find her behind a red veil: angry red, furious red, with her white flesh scarlet behind it. Fire woman! Goddess of the sunset! Naked enchantress of the flaming belly of Melek, into which babies were tossed to die in its fires!

Her arms lifted and she called him softly.

Then she was behind a thin black drapery and now she was at her most seductive, for she was Lilith and Astarte and Isis, and her skin was pearl tinted with ebony, and the redness of her hair flavored her body with warmth. Only the black veil held him from her comforts.

Jothab was vaguely aware that Candia was rousing him to insanity with these tactics, robbing him of his gift of manhood and substituting for it the brutish slavery of an animal. And like an animal he became, rushing to her, hearing her laughter and her soft commands.

He obeyed her whispers, and tumbled with her across the thickly cushioned divan. Only later did it come to Jothab—when he stood face to face with his destiny—that Candia, like Omri and his captains, was only using him as she might a clever and attractive slave.

Naomi crouched in the dust, with a striped shawl hiding her black hair, which was streaked with ashes and dust.

She trembled in the hot sunlight as a strange coldness lay on all her limbs. An agony of spirit was in Naomi, who was wife to Jothab, a sense of abasement that made her revel in the fact that the pebbles of the streets of Jerusalem had cut her naked soles. The pain moving upward from her calves into her middle was almost pleasant in her present mortification.

Nathan faced her, his hand opening and closing on his gnarled staff.

"What is this gibberish you speak? What of Jothab?"

"He is gone. Gone from our house these two weeks now. He has left me, abandoned me for another woman."

Nathan snorted. He knew Jothab as a vain and arrogant man, who was weak without suspecting the fact. More than once he had disappeared like this in the past, to hunt antelopes on the plain of Sharon. Nathan strongly suspected that he did more than hunt on these little expeditions. Word came to him from time to time that foreign slave women had been sent north a day ahead of Jothab, under strict guard.

The prophet argued with Jothab, but he was aware of an understanding sympathy with him. Jothab was older than Solomon, yet Solomon was king in Jerusalem. This was the will of Yahweh, with which no man could quarrel. Solomon was a great king. Jothab would make only a foolish one. Yet Jothab, perhaps because of his very vanity and weakness of spirit, could not forget that the crown was his heritage. What matter that he ran off occasionally, to lose himself with wine and woman flesh?

Nathan bit his lip as he looked down at the sobbing Naomi.

"My daughter, do you know this for a fact? Jothab has hunted at other times."

She lifted her face and the prophet was shocked at the ashen grayness of her cheeks and the deep lines that ran from the corners of her lips and from the edges of her

black eyes. Naomi had been weeping, yet there were no tears on her cheeks. Only that awful horror and despair in her staring eyes.

"He is in Gaza. He consorts with King Omri and with his daughter Candia."

Nathan started, feeling unaccountably cold. "In Philistia? But what does he do there? And how had you this word? Surely, not from Jothab?"

Naomi whispered, "From a trader in pottery who came into Jerusalem this morning. He says all Philistia talks of the coming marriage between Jothab, prince of Israel, and Candia, daughter of King Omri."

"Malicious gossip," snorted Nathan, but he was troubled.

Twice in the past week shepherds from Mount Ebal had sought him out, telling him of armed men gathering on the slopes of Mount Carmel. They could see sunlight flashing on iron corselets and leg-greaves, and on swords and spear points as they were being sharpened. They were as many as the stars in the sky, asserted the shepherds.

Jothab, marrying with Candia! And armed men meeting on Mount Carmel!

Nathan put a hand on the shawled head of Naomi. An infinite pity welled in him for this woman, caught like the millet seed between the grinding stones of ambitious men.

"Be comforted, Naomi. You only start at shadows. It is a rumor, nothing more. Jothab wandered from Sharon into Philistia. He has been recognized, and is being feted, as befits his station as a visiting prince. That is all."

Naomi groaned. She dared not disagree with this holy man, but her heart told her that what he said was not true. There had been a difference in Jothab those last few days at home. Nerkal the Assyrian had come often, and when he came, he and Jothab secreted themselves for long hours. Then she had given no thought to the snatches of whispered words that had come to her ears. Now they made sense.

When Nerkal went away, almost at the same time that Solomon, according to rumor, had fallen ill and been confined to his bed, Jothab threw himself into feverish preparations for his hunting trip. Messengers came and went, lean riders from Philistia and from Canaan, secretly and at night.

Being a dutiful wife, Noami did not speak of these matters with her husband. Yet her ears were alive and open, and the snatches of talk came back a hundredfold to plague her.

Brokenly she told Nathan of the messengers, and of the words she overheard as she brought dishes of fruit to her husband as he conferred with these foreigners.

"They were royal courtiers. I know that now," she whispered, still crouched in the street dust. "They carried signals that bore the bull's head of Philistia and papyrus scrolls wrapped in ebony cylinders."

Nathan brooded, leaning heavily on his staff.

It had been a mistake to let Solomon leave Jerusalem. He knew that at last. No king is safe when his throne stands untenanted during a long absence.

With his fingertips he touched Naomi. Lifting his eyes to the bright blue sky, he prayed to Yahweh. "Go home, Naomi. Go home and pray as I have prayed. Pray for Jothab and for Solomon. Pray most of all for Israel."

Then he was gone, walking with a swiftness that seemed alien to the whiteness of his beard and flowing hair, brown woolen robe flapping about his thin ankles.

Naomi stared after him a moment. Moaning, she threw back the shawl that covered her head. Bending, she scooped up street dust and let it trickle between her fingers over her black hair. No longer was she a woman with a husband. In one way or another, Jothab was done with her.

Nathan was even more troubled than Naomi. She bewailed a lost husband. He walked in fear of a lost nation.

Yet as he walked, a certain calmness of spirit came to him. It was as if Yahweh spoke to him, chiding him: Have I not promised that Solomon shall rule Jerusalem in all his glory? Is My word that of a man in the market place?

Nathan walked through the narrow streets between the towering stone walls of the houses near the Potter's Gate, and felt the nobility of that voice speak with him, cheering his low spirits.

Still in that trance he went up the steps of the Temple and between the mighty pillars into the cool, quiet interior. Here the walls were of red cedar, hung with yellow gold, and the columns were slim and graceful. Cunning Phoenician architects had designed this House of God, and clever artisans had fashioned the capitals of its columns and the styling of its friezework. The floor tiles were of glacéed clay, tinted in black and white and vermilion.

At the far end of the hall, behind the heavy black hanging of the Holy of Holies, was the Ark.

With lowered head and on silent feet, Nathan walked to the horned altar that stood before the drape and knelt.

Silently he prayed, until the shadows grew long and the sunlight faded from the great brass doors and latticed windows high above.

Then he rose and went out and stood in the hazy twilight.

Something turned him then and took him away from the Temple and along the Trypogon Valley wall toward the Palace of David. He walked with serenity, knowing that he went on a mission, not understanding the role he was to play, but believing in himself. Words would come when they were needed. They would be words that Yahweh wanted him to say.

The place was silent as he entered it. The palace was always silent these days, now that Solomon was in Sheba. A woman was looking at him from the entrance to the

chambers assigned to Anohbet; a slim woman wearing a diaphanous robe and girdle of silver sun discs, her long black wig set with a lotus-blossom diadem. This was Tiy, the Egyptian handmaiden of Anohbet. Nathan closed his eyes that he might not see the flesh she revealed so frankly under the transparent linen.

"The Queen would see you, Nathan," said the woman softly, stepping back and lifting the fringed hanging to show him the interior of the apartment.

Nathan hesitated, then remembered the aura of destiny in which he had seemed to walk as he came past the high market on his way to the palace. Anohbet was a stranger in Jerusalem. Knowing the affection in which Solomon held her, Nathan always made himself scrupulously polite, though he frowned on the worship of Hathor and Isis that court gossip said she practiced on tiny onyx altars in her bedchambers.

His white head bowed, and he nodded to the girl.

He stepped into the room, discovering it to be frescoed with the stylized lotus symbols of Egypt on its walls and slender pillars. Tiny clay statues were ranged in rows along the shelved walls, half-naked images of the gods of Egypt with the towering royal white *hets* on their heads, or holding in their hands the *nas* scepter and the war knife, the *klepesh*. A little ebony and marble altar burned balsam incense.

Anohbet sat on a small ivory throne ornate with sculptured asps.

Nathan had never seen her look so regal. She wore the hawk headdress of Isis with its feathered wings framing her ears, the *uraei* asps rising from the coronet. A gold pectoral, set with jewels and formed in the imagery of the *ankh* and matching hawks, lay above the red transparency of her tight byssus tunic.

"I have summoned you to me, Nathan, to speak about my husband. Solomon has gone from the throne. He has

traveled south to Sheba. I have sent a messenger, summoning him home."

Nathan started. This woman who looked so foreign to his eyes in her rich Egyptian setting was almost unknown to him. Only once or twice before had he spoken with her. She held herself aloof from him and from his people, in her pride. And yet there was a royalty to her body that he had seen before only in David and in Solomon. Saul had never quite achieved this detachment of self that was so much a part of kingship.

"Solomon is king in Jerusalem. He is a wise king. He knows what is best for him."

Her smile was tight, and, he thought, a little pitying. "You people of Israel have been kings only a little while," she said slowly. "My ancestors have ruled for centuries. The knowledge of ruling is born into our blood. Do you know that Jothab plans to overthrow Solomon and succeed to his throne? Do you know that Candia will marry Jothab, and bring a Philistine army into Israel?"

"I learned it an hour ago."

His answer suggested that only witchcraft could account for the fact that Anohbet, who was always shut up within the blue and red walls of her apartments, could know as much as he about these world affairs.

"A man or woman rules a nation by knowing what transpires on all sides of his kingdom." She smiled gently. "My father has spies in Ashkalon and in Dor. They tell him what is happening there. What my father knows he tells me, through special couriers who seemingly bring me only rich gifts."

Nathan was a man of God, a holy man. It came to him that this woman, who was neither a Hebrew nor an Edomite, was a vessel chosen by Yahweh to do His will. He said slowly, glancing heavily at the woman from under thick white brows, "What would you have me do? Why do you tell me this?"

"We must leave Jerusalem. We must find Solomon. Already I have despatched riders to Megiddo."

The stables at Megiddo held two thousand war chariots, with more than twenty thousand horses. Experienced veterans were housed there, men who had fought against Philistia before.

"I have ordered them south to the Wilderness of Zin, close to the land of Edom. We will meet Solomon there."

"And leave Jerusalem open and unprotected?" asked Nathan in amazement and dismay.

Anohbet came off her little ivory throne and paced back and forth in the chamber, her woven palm-leaf sandals making no sound. Nathan stared at her, seeing for the first time the inheritance of authority that was in this slim brown woman, understanding now why Yahweh had given her to Solomon.

"What is Jerusalem but a dwelling place for Solomon?" she asked. "My husband is king in Israel! Let all Jerusalem be burned if it must, but Solomon must stay alive. Slaves can rebuild buildings of stone and marble and cedar. No one can breathe life into a man, once he is dead. It shall be as I say!"

Nathan recognized her wisdom. He knew she summoned him to enlist his aid. Alone, she could not do what must be done. She needed help, help from someone whose word was almost as strong as that of Solomon in Israel. He was that man.

Nathan bowed and his lips moved as he whispered gratitude to Yahweh, understanding at last the sense of fate with which he had come from the Temple.

"We will leave when you say, my queen," he said solemnly, and saw gratitude come into her bright brown eyes.

"A file of spearmen for protection! A dozen chariots, and a pack train to follow us as soon at it can be arranged. Mounted riders out ahead of us, to prepare the way!"

Nathan hesitated. "This messenger you sent south to

Sheba—can he arrive in time to bring Solomon safely home before Jothab comes with his Philistine army?"

Anohbet shivered. "That is in the lap of the gods. Your God! My gods! Solomon tells me his Yahweh is the only God. If He is, then pray hard to Him, Nathan. Pray hard!"

Nathan saw tears glisten on the dusky cheeks of the Egyptian woman. Why, she loves him! he thought suddenly. He said softly, "I will go now, and pray again. This time I will pray also for you, for it comes to me that a king can never be a good ruler unless his queen is a strong and understanding woman."

Anohbet watched the old man go with wet eyes. Is your God a god of love, Nathan? she wanted to cry out after him. If He is, then pray also that Solomon will turn from whatever woman it is he has found in Sheba and come back to me! And let him be more understanding than he has been in the past.

The irony of it was, she reflected, that what she wanted this Yahweh of Solomon to do was convert her husband into a belief in her own gods.

If the fear in her had not been so strong, she might have laughed.

The Egyptian horse was the finest riding animal in the world. Since the days of the great Menes, it had been trained and bred for speed and endurance. The dappled gray mare that Inhotep straddled was as fast and as lasting as any ever raised. She fled like a shadow past the oases of Dumah and Tema. Her flying hoofs raised faint dust whorls along the caravan road that went through the lands of Ophir like a ribbon connecting Sheba with Edom.

A change of horses awaited him in Khava.

From Khava to Ophir lay four hundred miles of easy riding, for his way went along the level plains of coastal shale that skirted the great red desert. It was in the hilly

deserts and great beds of lava called *harran* that dotted the lands of Ophir that the going grew rough, across sand roadways. There were great granite hills here, sheltering the fertile upland regions, and small islets and stone reefs extending out into the sea. As he fled southward, he came to a land dotted with masonry towers where nomads lived on the oasis-speckled fringe of the great inland desert.

Worry rode with Inhotep, and pity. The daughter of his pharaoh was in deadly danger. Should this Jothab prove himself superior to Solomon, Anohbet would suffer the fate of all conquered women. Fury writhed in his veins like a snake in the reeds at that thought.

"Faster, sister of the *khamsin*," he whispered to the mare.

At a stone stable in Khava, a brown stallion awaited his saddle. Inhotep took time only to eat a dozen barley cakes and sip two skins of barley beer. Then he was in the saddle again, and the ground was flying past.

There were hill robbers to be found in Ophir, the liveryman warned him. It was safest to travel only by night. Still, to laze away the days while Anohbet fled from Jerusalem in terror of her life was abhorrent to Inhotep.

"Run, my brother," he told the brown stallion. "I will be your eyes and your shield!"

Sheba came nearer with each pounding hoofbeat.

Chapter Seven

THE TEMPLE OF ASTARTE was an edifice of Parian marble and Indian ebony. Its silvered dome made a curving brilliance in the late-afternoon sunlight; a beacon to a sea traveler, thought Solomon, as he stared unwinkingly up at it, for it could be seen far out at sea on a clear day. The temple stood on a high knoll above the wharves and docks of Sheba. It beckoned to the sailors, promising the radiant delights of seaside taverns and the sweetness of cheap Cretan wine. It offered the fleshy pleasures of dockside wenches or even the rarer favors of a Sheban matron who might choose this day to visit its walled gardens.

Solomon handed Balkis down from the apron of her ivory chariot before the temple.

Together they stood a moment, savoring the shouts of the people who formed two lanes along the Way of Astarte. Colored scarves fluttered beside waving swords and polished helmets, for the soldiers mixed with women and the merchants of the city on this eve of the spring moon, sacred to the goddess.

"They worship you, Solomon, for your wisdom and your strength," said Balkis with a smile.

Solomon rather fancied that Balkis had sent men into the city taverns and along the water front to spread word of what he had done in the audience hall some days ago. Like other rulers, Balkis wanted the approval of the populace when she went before her counselors with news of the coming alliance with Israel and its young king.

Resting a hand on his wrist, Balkis let him lead her up the white marble steps of the temple and between the towering pillars that threw black shadows over the mosaic

tiles of the portico at this noontime of the day. The touch of her fingers was warm and encouraging, as if she gave him assurance by her presence.

Three priests with golden censers in their hands were chanting as they approached. Tiny puffs of bluish incense were blown here and there by the lazy sea breeze. The priests would assist Balkis in the sacrifices that must be made during the vernal equinox by Sheba's queen, who was also its high priestess. As Solomon and Sheba swept past them, they swung and followed, pacing slowly and solemnly. The faint clanking of the censer chains was audible above the distant chanting of the temple choir in the dim recesses of the halls.

Uneasiness made Solomon come to a momentary halt on the threshold of the inner court. This was a pagan temple, forbidden to him. Balkis was to make sacrifice to ensure fertility and plenty for her people during the coming year. Deep inside him, he knew that she would ask him to join her in the rite.

And he would do as Balkis asked him.

He knew that as surely as she knew that he walked forward now by her side, between the rows of statues in the archways between the temple columns. Far ahead of them, overhung by a drapery of rich black fabric, was the image of the goddess. Before her, between her arched legs, was the wide, shallow bowl of an altar. It was there that Balkis would pour the blood from the living victim, offering life to Astarte.

Now they stood before the gigantic marble woman.

They were tiny figures, lost in the immensity of the temple. The priests came forward. One of them carried a golden cage in which a beautiful Persian pheasant with bronzed tail feathers and gilded wings fluttered nervously. Another held the sacrificial knife, a glittering length of highly polished bronze with a golden haft. They walked between the black tripods where fire burned with bluish

flames, clad in short, quilted kilts, their naked chests smeared with blood in the oval symbol of the goddess.

"Take the bird from the cage, Solomon," whispered Balkis. "Hold it for me as I draw the knife across its throat."

He did as she asked, telling himself that he did not believe in this ritual, and that he did it only to win Sheba's alliance with Israel, that Israel might stand first among all the nations of the world. The bird was soft and frightened. It fluttered wildly as it felt his long fingers grip and hold it helpless.

The knife slid forward, slicing deep.

Blood ran out in a red stream from the limp bird and down into the golden bowl.

"Astarte! Hear our plea! Astarte, give thyself to us, as we give ourselves to thee! Take our blood. Give us of thy strength and thy beauty and the fruitfulness of thy heavy loins! Mother of the gods! Consort of great Baal and matron of his home! She who walks on the waves of the sea! Woman of the Fertile Loins! Woman of Magic and Mystery! Goddess of War! Holder of the Sword and the Ax! Sister of the Chariots! Astarte, hear our plea!"

There was silence for a moment in the temple.

A priest cried out to the people in the streets and they shouted wildly. They would celebrate this spring night with orgiastic worships at the tiny street altars the priests had set up throughout the city. No woman could refuse a man this night. Any man could bed with any woman he might ask. Under the pale silver light of the evening star, which was sacred to the goddess, any and all forms of human congress would be blessed in her sight. Even now, at half a hundred stalls on the other side of the temple grounds, novice priests were selling fertility symbols of the goddess done in copper, gold, and silver to the men and women of Sheba.

Solomon grimaced in distaste. The more he thought of

the worship of Astarte—or Ashtaroth or Ishtar or Isis, as she was known in Phoenicia and in Babylon and in Egypt —the more his disgust grew. Yet this worship of the mother goddess went far back into antiquity, into the early days when men wore only the skins of beasts and worked with tools of wood and stone. It was simply an outpouring of fear against the time of starvation and famine and enemy onslaught.

To ensure that crops grew and that the game animals would fall victim to their spears, those first men had offered up their gifts. Somewhere, shrouded in the mists of time, the men of the desert lands came to associate the fertile goddess with the fecund woman. The Woman of the Fruitful Loins meant sons to a man and fighting men to a tribe. The notion of the *bona dea* came as a result of the ancient matriarchal type of government, for man was a wanderer in the days of his youth, and the heads of the clans were often the mothers.

The mother goddess was an invention of the desert tribes. At first, Astarte had been the lady of the oases. It was her good will that kept the water there for the desert nomads, her tenderness that increased their flocks. To maintain this good will, the race of men sought to please her; and what could be more pleasing to a female goddess than a worship of her very womanliness? Following the sacrifices came the periods of orgy, when every man and every woman sought to win favor by the very abandon of their worship.

From these early beginnings the rites expanded until it became a sin for a woman to remain a virgin. Harlotry became an accepted tenet of the pagans. Temples grew crowded with women waiting to offer up their bodies to such strangers as found them pleasant, and the priests began to practice magic and read the stars.

A touch of fingers on his arm roused Solomon from his dreamings. Balkis waited, eyes bright and feverish.

"We go now into the garden, Solomon. I will give myself to a priest, and you will take your choice of the temple women."

"No," he said harshly. "I will do no more than I have already done."

Balkis smiled faintly. Her blued eyelids lowered a moment, giving her a sultry, fleshy look. "You seek to make alliances. But can you ally yourself with people who know you despise their religion? All Sheba worships Astarte, as Hiram of Tyre adores Ashtaroth."

Solomon struggled silently within himself. The driving ambition that was like an iron goad to his spirit recognized the truth of her argument. The spirituality of his nature, an inheritance from his ancestors, told him that this was no religion at all, but only a looseness of moral fiber. And yet, if it were known that Solomon the wise despised Astarte, how long would the armies he needed, and the navies, which would be comprised of men who wore her golden oval, be willing to fight beneath his standards? No, a man who chose to make himself world ruler could never ignore the people who served him.

"Where are the gardens?" he asked hoarsely.

"Behind the temple. Come with me."

They walked past the basalt altar with its golden bowl and the towering figure of the goddess, along a narrow corridor flanked by colonnades of Phrygian marble. Votive urns and ceremonial jars of gold and silver rested on small tables before every pillar. Ahead of them was a bronze doorway that opened out onto a plat of green grass.

The gardens were large, and intersected by stone paths that wound in and out between beds of red-flowering quince and white-flowered myrrh shrubs. Frankincense trees cast their stippled shadows over marble benches and tiny fountains where splashing waters tinkled musically. From the temple outward, high stone walls surrounded the grass squares and the flower beds. Built into the walls

were small cubicles where a man and a woman might retire to worship the goddess in privacy.

They stood a moment in the shadow of the temple doorway, staring.

Women were seated on the benches in the sunlight, or on tiny stools before the doorways of the wall niches. None of them wore more than a thin *khalak*, and some were naked except for soft white leather sandals. They wore jeweled rings and necklaces of golden droplets, for these were the rich noblewomen of the city, matrons and virgins of the finest Sheban families, whose rank entitled them to worship Astarte within the sacred gardens.

Balkis watched Solomon slyly. "Choose one, and take her into one of the wall cubicles."

"And you?"

Her hand gestured at a white marble rotunda with domed roof and pillared walls that rose in the geometric center of the gardens. "I will go into the royal chamber, which is always reserved for the rulers of Sheba." She hesitated, then said, "I will wait, and give you precedence in the worship, if you want. You are my ruler, and will be ruler of Sheba, too. The priests will not object."

Solomon shook his head. The uneasiness inside him, which grew with every moment within this cloying garden, was strong upon his spirit. He wanted nothing so much as to get this business over and done with, and go out into the clean sunlight of the streets.

"No. You go into your royal pavilion. I'll wait outside."

Balkis laughed. "I'd rather be sure you chose a woman, Solomon. And put a smile on your face. You look so glum! This is a happy time, this period of spring worship of Astarte."

There were women here whom he had seen at the feasts and banquets that Balkis of Sheba had given in his honor. Embarrassed, he tried to look away from the sight of smooth thighs and dimpled hips, but no matter where he

put his eyes, the women were there. Nor were they shy. On this day, the more abandoned they became, the more honor they would pay the goddess.

A slim woman was strolling between a tamarind tree and a *khat* bush, close by a small incense altar. The large shawl that draped her shoulders hung in such a manner that it was open from white ankles to her shoulders on either side. Against his will, Solomon felt his eyes drawn to the jiggling of her bared hip. Her black hair was long, hanging loose down her back. Unlike the other women, she wore neither silver pins nor golden wires to restrain that ebony flood. There were no rings on her fingers, and no jewels glittered from wrists or throat.

"Ammasta," said Balkis. "The wife of Kabesh."

Solomon turned aside, but Balkis was there before him. "Forget your scruples, Solomon! Here in Sheba, to bed with a wife is to pay tribute to the husband. Kabesh will be proud, knowing his wife is lovely enough to attract the man I love. That she will not have to pay a priest to act the part of lover is a compliment to her beauty."

"I could not do it," he said firmly, remembering the friendliness of the palace officer.

Ammasta turned at a small stone bench and came strolling along the graveled path. Solomon watched her, studying the aristocratic features of her face, seeing the long legs flashing whitely in the sun. When she saw Balkis standing beside Solomon, she came striding toward them more swiftly.

"Solomon comes to offer himself to Astarte, Ammasta." Balkis smiled lazily. "He's had his eyes on you for some time, but he's shy. It seems he respects Kabesh too much to pair with his wife."

Ammasta looked surprised. As a flush touched her cheeks, she said sweetly, "Solomon must not judge Sheba by Jerusalem. I would be happy to share a couch with the King of Israel. Very happy."

"Then that's settled," said Balkis, and Solomon caught the relief in her voice.

Ammasta reached for his hand, and drew him with her down the pathway of crushed stone. Although this woman wore no jewels, her palms had anointed her white flesh with musky perfumes. Solomon discovered, despite the distaste with which he chided himself, that his heart was thudding in his rib case with sincere vigor. Her fingers were continually moving as they held his hand, tightly squeezing or almost limp or frenziedly clutching. He was aware also that his own breathing had become heavier.

As she stepped inside the wall cubicle, her hand went to the thin *khalak* she wore, and tore it from her. She posed there, hands lifted and buried in her thick black hair, smiling proudly as she felt the weight of his eyes on her body. Her head fell back, and now that long black hair brushed the stone floor of the tiny chamber as the movement of her head and body swung her breasts.

"Over a year I have waited for this moment," she whispered hoarsely. "Over a year! Nor shall we hurry. This day will have to live a long time in my memory."

It came to Solomon, even as he felt her honeyed breath against his mouth, that Ammasta was symbolic of her pagan land. She and all her people lived only for a gratification of the senses, in an animal belief in bodily joys that had become a way of life.

The horseman came clattering across the paving stones of the market square. Foam flecked the flanks of the big Egyptian stallion, and it staggered in its weariness. Exhaustion sat heavily in the muscles of Inhotep, too, for he had come fast in the last two weeks from Jerusalem across sixteen hundred miles of lava road and coastal shore to the city of Sheba.

The streets were crowded with men and women. They thronged the open food stalls, where long loaves of bar-

ley bread were being sold fresh from the beehive ovens, and where little ivory statuettes of Astarte and Baal were sold over the flat wooden counters. Meatsellers, with strips of lamb and beef steaming from the fires, hawked their wares in singsong voices. Winemakers were watching carefully as their slaves poured red Thasian and white Mareotic wines from the huge eathenware amphoras into smaller craters. This night would be a bedlam of rioters. More than one merchant would lock himself safely within doors as the sun lowered, content to count the copper and silver drachmas that had passed into his leather coin pouches during the daylight hours.

A tipsy woman staggered against the big horse, learing up at the brown rider. "Come, Egyptian! Worship Isis with me when darkness comes!" A soldier from Edmon, a big mercenary with black beard and hairy forearms, caught and lifted her high with his hands in her armpits as she howled drunken laughter.

"Solomon?" the rider called down at them. "Where is Solomon?"

A redheaded tavern maid lurched forward, clutching at his leg. Her cheeks were stained with henna, and a tear in her loose linen garment bared an arm from wrist to shoulder.

"The King of Israel worships with the Queen of Sheba in the temple of Astarte."

Inhotep fumbled for a coin, but the girl lifted herself by clinging to his belt and pressed her mouth hotly against his lips. She giggled. "This is the only coin we know today, brown man!"

Then the girl was falling away, stumbling, and the Egyptian horse was moving nervously forward, shoving a path between the revelers. A flock of doves, sacred to the goddess, had been released from wicker cages, fanning the air with snowy wings. Inhotep toed the stallion forward.

It was slow going, but Inhotep made it, by a mixture

of curses and laughter and appeals to Set and Horus. Where a score of shallow wicker baskets, filled with ripe black olives, stood to one side of a sandalmaker's shop, he reined in the horse. A multitude of howling, shouting people pressed against each other before a vast white stone temple ahead of him. Hands were upraised, holding copper and wooden symbols of Astarte.

"Balkis!" they roared. "Balkis and Solomon!"

"Solomon! Solomon!"

They were coming down the flat, low steps of the temple, side by side. The westering sun was behind them, so that their figures made long black shadows on the steps. It seemed to the watching Inhotep that the shadow of Balkis obscured and hid the leaner shadow of the King.

As the Egyptian pushed the stallion into the mob, the people surged forward. Hands reached out to touch the man and woman trying to reach the glittering gold-and-ivory chariot of Balkis. His ears could not distinguish the words in the uproar of sound that swelled from ten thousand throats, but Inhotep could sense the exultation in them. These people loved the King of Israel. Loved him and their queen, this Balkis, whose veiling cloak was being shredded from her shoulder by laughing men.

"Stay the night in the streets, Balkis!"

"Aye, and you too, Solomon. Test your strength against the strength of the men of Sheba!"

"Is he strong enough to last the night, Balkis?"

A thunder of laughter rose into the sunset, and Inhotep chose that moment to toe the Theban stallion forward. "Make way for Solomon's messenger! I bring him news from Israel!"

Only a few heard his cry against the greater sound of revelry and laughter, and so he shouted again. "Solomon! News from Jerusalem! News from Anohbet!"

Solomon turned at that name and stood still, scanning the people hemmed in around the chariot. The Egyptian

sat high in the saddle. His broad, lean shoulders were naked, for all he wore against his riding was a loincloth of red linen and a striped headdress. Over his head he held the cylinder which encased the sheepskin scroll over which Anohbet had labored in the night.

"From Israel! News from Anohbet!"

Solomon came off the chariot step like a panther scenting meat. He went between the people with long strides and his great arms thrust and shoved open a path. Men laughed and yielded way. Here and there a woman thrust her body against him, to cling a moment and caress him before the pushing throng tugged her away. Then he was beside the Egyptian, taking the ivory cylinder from his brown hand.

"Follow me!" he ordered, and with the Egyptian behind him he fought his way back to the chariot.

A squad of palace spearmen lifted their shields and spear ends and flailed left and right, good-naturedly. Slowly the crowd opened and the chariot surged forward, painted wheels creaking as the iron rims rattled over the paving stones.

"What news?" asked Balkis, clinging by one hand to a curving rail.

"I haven't opened it yet. But it will be very grave for Anohbet to part with Inhotep like this." Inhotep was captain of the Egyptian guards who lived only to serve the daughter of their pharaoh in a foreign land. They were sworn on their love for Isis to give their lives for hers if the need arose.

He was aware that her eyes were worried as they searched his face. She said flatly, "It's bad news, then. No man rides a horse to that condition when he brings good tidings."

In a little antechamber off the main audience hall of the Sheban palace, Inhotep made his report. With the scroll in his hand, tapping the ivory cylinder worriedly

against the rim of a table, Solomon listened. The anxiety that had been in his blood all day was now outright concern. Every word that the Egyptian spoke added to his dismay.

"Jothab plots against the throne in Gaza. He makes treaties with King Omri, and cements them by marriage to Candia, his daughter. He is gathering an army on Mount Carmel. Another army may be forming in Gaza, to strike upward from the south."

"Jothab, my brother!" said Solomon bitterly, and crushed the sheepskin in a big hand.

The message scrawled on the parchment had come from Anohbet, summoning him home. Anohbet had counseled him to give ear to Inhotep.

The Egyptian drew a deep breath, then went on. "My queen has fled from Jerusalem by this time, with Nathan. She is taking shelter in the Wilderness of Zin. She will wait for you there, she and Nathan."

"And my armies? What of my spearmen and my archers? And the chariots and horses in Megiddo? Are all but Nathan and Anohbet disloyal to me?"

Inhotep smiled grimly. "Nathan ordered your captains from Megiddo south to Zin. Whether they will go or not, what man knows?"

Solomon came to his feet suddenly, breathing harshly. His black eyes gleamed proudly under the straight thin brows that almost touched as he frowned. With his fist he pounded on the flat slab of the tripod table that held a red earthenware oil lamp. He fought to quell the rage in him, the sting of injured pride. He had thought himself so secure in his kingship! He had come south to Sheba like a fool, instead of like the wise man all the world acclaimed him to be. Empty he had left his gold-and-ivory throne. Only an old man and an Egyptian woman who hated him because of his love for Yahweh were there to guard his interests.

His love for Yahweh?

Solomon laughed harshly. His frantic eyes searched the apartment, finding a silver statue of Astarte standing on a thin ivory pedestal, staring at him. In three strides he was at the pedestal, reaching out and clutching the statue, bringing it down hard on the cold hard slab of the onyx top, again and again.

The statue broke and fell apart under that savage battering, revealing itself as only a thin shell of silver, hollow inside.

"This is the worship of Astarte!" he cried to the startled Inhotep. "All silver and show, with nothing inside. No heart. No blood. Nothing!"

He threw the broken thing from him and watched it roll across the black tile floor. Bitterness was on his tongue and between his teeth. Yet it did no good to smash little silver statues. The harm was done, and temper fits could not undo it. The throne he had left in Jerusalem would be occupied when he returned to the Valley of Cedron, if ever he returned there alive.

Jothab would be king in his place. Where are your dreams of world conquest now, Solomon? he asked himself in his heart, and he flinched against the answer.

"I'll ride before dawn!" he grated savagely. "You will follow with Benajah. You'll need sleep and rest, and good food."

Inhotep smiled. "I am ready to ride now, Highness."

Solomon brooded at him darkly. "If I order you into your saddle, you'll delay me. You know this as well as I. I intend to be the *belat* wind itself as it sweeps up the Arabian coast! I will not dally to eat or sleep, but only to rest my horse."

The decision eased his mind, giving him peace within himself. There would be no time in which to blame himself for leaving Jerusalem, no time to worry about his chariots and his army captains and their loyalty. Instead

there would be only the fever of preparation for the riding ahead: barley bread and meat for the saddlebags, a waterskin, warm garments against the cold, and a skin pouch filled with coins. He would carry his iron sword at his waist, and tie a panther skin across the saddle against the heights of land he might be forced to cross.

Benajah came on the run from the guardhouse, where he had been inspecting a dozen new throwing spears. His dark face was congested with angry blood, and he would not listen to Solomon.

"You are my king, but you are also my companion in arms," he said harshly. "There is more to the bond between us than loyalty. There is love between men who have shared common dangers. I ride when you ride."

Balkis waited alone for him in her bedchamber.

There was pride in her eyes at sight of his tall, lean figure, and a faint touch of understanding at the anger in his eyes. Her palms were soft on his chest as she stood close, looking up at him.

"Summon me when you have smashed this man Jothab," she said softly.

"I will smash him!" As my hand smashed the silver Astarte, he thought recklessly, letting the rage in him move along his veins until he trembled. "I will run him through with a spear, as Joab slew Absalom, and as Benajah slew Joab!"

Her fingers held him when he would have broken free. The pulsebeat in him throbbed wildly, stirring up the need for action. Before the dawn was here, he would be gone from Sheba.

"Promise, Solomon! Promise that you will send for me and that you will never forget what we have been to each other!"

For an instant, the iron of his soul melted and ran. His thick arms strained her close as he buried his lips in her

perfumed black hair. "I will never forget you, Balkis!"

Even as her mouth came around to crush itself on his and he felt her body quiver, Solomon knew that this woman was joined irrevocably to his life; that the skeins of fate twisted their affairs so closely that what one felt the other must feel, as a blow on the shield shocked the arm that held it. He thought that this might be a confession of weakness in him; but, stubbornly, he did not care. Balkis had taught him what a woman could be to the man she loved.

Then she was straining back, untwisting a huge sardonyx ring, whose face was carved with the seal of Sheba, from a forefinger. She held it out to him.

"Take this. It will see you safe to the oasis of Dumah. Want food, and it will fetch it. Want horses, and it will bring them. Only show it to the owners of the roadside khans, or to the men who guard the stone towers along the caravan road, to have your wish fulfilled."

She hurled herself against him as she pressed the ring into his palm. Her cheeks were wet with tears. Desperately she pressed her face against his cheek, rubbing it there as if to erase this frightening moment. She cried out, "Leave now, while the queen in me is still alive! Don't wait for my womanhood to take command, or I will never let you go!"

He turned and ran and his cloak swayed a little in the fury of his movement. Only the echoes of his sandaled feet came up the long and empty hall to the woman who stood frozen and afraid in the red light of a flickering wall torch. He is gone forever out of your life, Balkis of Sheba! In his going, you have lost him!

"No," she whispered to the room. Her eyes stared wildly from a low divan to an ebony bench and on to the little porphyry fountain with its griffin's-head spout, then to the tiny tables of ornate ivory fretwork that held her lotion vials and perfume bottles; familiar objects that

looked strange to the wildness of her glance. "He will be back. He will. I know he will!"

There was a marble statue of Astarte behind a low altar. Balkis ran to the goddess, falling to her knees. Her hands came up to clutch the naked legs in a feverish grip. Her wet eyes stared blindly at the carven features, seeing a reflection of her own blindness in that coldly lovely face.

"Bring him back to me! Bring him back!"

The cold legs of the statue mocked her fingers. Almost in horror she drew away, staring upward. This stone woman to which she prayed, this cold marble on which her hands had fastened—what could she do for her? How could something that existed only in her own mind have any control over a man who ran from her palace as if she had the plague?

Balkis trembled and shook as she crouched, hiding her face in her hands. For the first time since Solomon had come into her life, she felt alone and very much afraid.

The city was alive on its cobbled streets as Solomon and Benajah came at the gallop from the high palace gates. Everywhere the rites to the mother goddess were being carried on. Men and women drank from little leather wine bags, or writhed together in the shadows of the wayside altars. Sometimes they formed crowds, walking arm in arm along the narrow alleys, laughing and shouting in their drunkenness and in the laxness of spirit that was permitted them on this night.

Benajah would have used the flat of his sword when revelers blocked their way, but Solomon restrained him. "You'll turn their laughter to hate, and men who hate will kill!"

Instead, Solomon showed the seal ring and laughed, cajoling the crowds that hemmed them in. When they recognized him, they shouted. As if by magic a path opened before their horses.

They could not ride fast in the city proper, but once the bronze gates in the high stone pylons clanged shut behind them, Solomon jabbed toes into ribs and rode with the wind whipping at his face. Now they were alone under the stars, and the moon was a round silver disc in the blue immensity above them.

The mountains of Sheba were on the right, towering high and barren, almost as if to shade this land where desert and sea and barren plain met with fertile farmland in a riot of nature. Hoofbeats pounded on the crushed slag of the coastal road, drumming accompaniment to the thoughts that gripped the man in the saddle. Rhythmically they pounded out the phrase; Solomon has lost his throne, Solomon has lost his throne! After a while the words blew away before the bitterness in his soul, and he rode with his face fixed and grim, with a madness in his dark eyes.

Nowhere could he look for help. Where did kings go when they needed aid and comfort? The Pharaoh Siamon, who was his father-in-law, dared not risk angering Philistia, for in the face of a combined Philistia-Israel, which would result from a victory by Jothab and King Omri, he could expect only war. And Egypt was no longer the military power it had been. Too many of its brown sons lay in piles of bleached bones along the war roads of their pharaohs in Canaan and in Ethiopia.

Other than Egypt, what was there?

Assyria, two hundred years before, had been a power. Now it was in a decline. Babylon had known its greatness under Hammurabi. Sheba was too far away to be of help in this fight. Besides, Sheba was a sea power, like Phoenicia. Hiram would sympathize, at Tyre, but he had no armies to send to his fellow ruler.

Crete was dead two hundred years. Greece was only a scattering of city-states. Media and Persis were hilly lands where wandering shepherds grazed their flocks.

And that was his world.

A world that had been in the palm of his hand, short weeks before, when he stood with Balkis and offered it to her.

Ironic laughter came from his lips. He was not aware that his hand was clenched so tightly on the ivory saddle horn until he went to shift position and discovered his fingers numb. As numb as the soul within him at the realization that he might only be riding to his death; not a pleasant death, either, if he remembered correctly the manner of dying inflicted on other rulers by their conquerors.

Assyria had been the chief offender in its cruelty, during the reign of Tiglath Pileser I. Rival kings were dragged in chains to the open squares before the great stone ziggurats and there were stripped naked and flayed alive, their skin peeled off in great ripping stretches to the accompaniment of their maddened screams. Or they might be seated and tied to a mock throne and molten gold poured down their throats. There were other torments visited on rival kings and rebel princes by conquering rulers, but he forced his mind away from this vein of thought.

Would Jothab show him the mercy of a quick spear jab? Or would Omri bring him behind his royal chariot to Gaza and there exhibit him in a cage until the time came to give him to the hot pincers and sharp knives of the public torturers?

Solomon bit his lip and hammered his sandaled heels into the ribs of his straining horse. Faster! Faster! Faster! Time alone would give him answers to the riddles that surrounded him on all sides, as the mob surrounded a woman taken in adultery, their stones flying from every direction, burying her beneath their blows.

"Yahweh!" he cried once in the night, knowing he had no right to voice the name.

Dawn found them forty miles from Sheba, pounding

along a stretch of gravelly hills, where a score of well-sweeps lifted their spidery limbs into the air from the deep channels of the river. In the time of drought and in the stark heat of the summer, these scoops churned endlessly, lifting river water higher and higher along the sloping banks to the fertile fields above. Great round mud balls acted as a balance for the wooden scoops fastened on the other end of the great sweeps. To Solomon they seemed grotesque beings, waving him a farewell from Sheba.

Then the river and the wellsweeps were behind them and the early-morning sun paced them past a stone tower and guardhouse that flanked the road. A stone corral in Nebaloth furnished a change of horses when Solomon showed the dragon ring of Balkis.

All that day they rode, and the next. They rested only to eat olives purchased from workers in a grove and finish the last of their dried meat and barley bread. Sleep was a luxury they could not afford in this headlong gallop back to Israel. Only now and then, and mostly to rest their mounts, did they curl up in their thick woolen cloaks by the side of a beehive granary or beneath the brown branches of a frankincense tree.

More than once they exchanged horses, always on the display of the golden ring surmounted by the dragon carved into its glittering jewel.

Once a *nasim* found them—that fiery wind that swept across the interior deserts, hot and scorching, drying vegetation and shriveling the skins of men and beasts—and they were forced to huddle with their horses in the shade of a stone *sakiyeh* whose timbers were sheltered by a grove of towering date palms.

They grew lean and haggard, and their beards were matted with dust and unkempt with goat's milk in the hot Arabian sun, a memento of the moments when they had paused to drink deeply at a nomad's tent. Their legs grew numb from the strain of clinging hour after hour to

the laboring sides of their horses. Eyes became bloodshot from the dust and the sun and the wind. A fierceness inside them kept them going, tempering the sag of worn-out muscles.

Eight days after leaving Sheba they reined in by the oasis of Tema. The cool blue waters and the leaning palm trees restored a little of their spirits. Zin and its wilderness lands lay three days' travel away. They were almost home. The seaport of Ezion-Geber lay to the west, the red desert of the Nufud to the east.

"Where that dark cloud lies is our goal," said Solomon, pointing northward. "It must cover part of Zin and part of Shur, as well."

The dark cloud was unmoving as they mounted and went on. It lay in the sky like a beckoning hand. Like the hand of an angry god, thought Solomon.

All that day they rode, through the haze of twilight, and still the dark cloud did not shift position. To their straining eyes, as night came down around them, it seemed to be visible as a blotch against the shining stars.

The next day, as Benajah felt the touch of Solomon's hand, he heard the worry in his voice. "The cloud is still there, Benajah. It does not move. It's almost as if it were an omen, warning me that evil days lie over Israel."

A quiet lay across the empty land. Faintly, from very far off, they could hear an eerie wail. Benajah tried to spit, but his mouth was too dry.

"The simoom," he said disgustedly, as if wondering what else might happen to them on this fantastic ride.

The simoom was a hot wind born in the trackless wastes of the great desert, a whirling mass of sand and hot air that shrieked and moaned as if its very soul were being wrenched by cosmic forces. Where the simoom went, there the face of the desert changed, and its dunes were never as they had been before its coming. It choked men and camels and horses, and many times it killed.

"We might outrun it, with luck," said Solomon, swinging onto his tired horse.

Despair was thick inside Solomon, weighing him down as heavily as the long iron sword at his belt. For the past few days his weariness had bred a dismay that had become a tumor in his spirit. He rode to meet his death as fanatically as any devotee of Cybele rushed to offer up his manhood. Jothab would be king of Israel, and Solomon's dead body would be flung headless and bloodied across a dung heap. Anohbet would be lost to him, and Balkis of Sheba, and all his plans for world conquest were a charnel-house stench in his nostrils.

"I was proud," he said to Benajah as they drove through a rising haze of swirling sand. "Now I shall pay for it!"

Benajah only grunted and lifted a fold of his *paenula* across his lower face. The wind was worse now, howling up from the Nufud dunes, bringing the sand in whirling blasts that put a reddish mist across the land. Soon the sand was all that they would see. It was thick and hazy, stinging where it caught their flesh. If they were unlucky, it would bury them alive under a towering dune of sand too heavy to remove.

The hills disappeared from view as the reddish haze came with the sand. Then the road was gone and they went on for a mile before they realized that they were lost. When they swung from their saddles, only sand was underfoot.

Benajah made the horses lie down.

The world was a mass of sand and red mist now. It was difficult to stand in the face of the hot, searing simoom. At such times experienced travelers lay with their heads covered by woolen cloaks, breathing through a bit of linen wrapped about the mouth and nostrils.

"Lie down behind your mount," shouted Benajah.

Solomon saw Benajah flop down and lie pressed to his horse. His knee was bending so that he could follow his

example when the wind moaned deeper and deeper, with a strange resonance he had never heard before. The wind was a voice, crying out to him!

Solomon stood frozen, lungs lifting heavily, hands clenched at his sides. His bloodshot eyes were slits looking this way and that in the sullen red haze of moaning sand. He took a step forward, and another.

Now the sand was whipping madly on all sides. No longer could he see the huddled horses, or Benajah. He was alone in the world, in a world he did not know; a world gone mad with the upheaval of all nature.

Beneath his sandals, the earth shook.

Solomon tottered.

"Yahweh! Yahweh!"

"Solomon, Solomon! Why are you afraid?"

His ears rang with the thunderous quality of that voice. His spirit shook inside him, like the woolen folds of his cloak where the simoom caught it. It was the wind making that sound, which he mistook for the voice of Yahweh. There was no other explanation!

The voice came again, chiding, gentle.

"I have put My mark upon you, Solomon. Do not fear!"

As in a spell, Solomon walked forward into the whirling madness. The red haze and the sand and the simoom swallowed him. The ground shook under him, and far ahead and nearer, and then all around him, he saw tongues of fire lifting from blackened cracks in the ground.

"Love you Me, Solomon? Believe you in Me?"

He went to his knees. Now there could be no doubt. This was Yahweh speaking to him. Tears came into his eyes. Unwinking, he held his gaze wide and open, even in the teeth of the sand.

"I love! I believe!"

"Then why have you offended Me? Why have you taken strange gods before Me? In Sheba, you worshiped

the abomination of abominations, the shameless Astarte, whose name is a smell in My nostrils!"

The world trembled and Solomon fell to the earth. His hands went out into the sand and closed, and he lifted the handfuls of the thick red grains and poured them over his head.

"I have sinned, Lord God of Israel!"

"You gave incense and the seed of your body to the pagans. Me you defiled! Me you scorned! Me you shunned!"

Solomon shook in his dread. What reply could he make to the Lord, Who saw all, even into the mind of a man and what he thought? The enormity of what he had done was revealed to his eyes at last. He shuddered in his abasement and a terrible cold lay in all his limbs.

"Yahweh!"

It was a scream for mercy, a plea for forgiveness, and an acknowledgment that he deserved no consideration, that solitary cry. It welled up in him and it carried with it all the days of his boyhood and his youth and his early manhood. In that word, he confessed his guilt and begged a chance for penance.

There was no need to argue the fact that what he planned with Balkis was for the greater glory of his God. His God knew that, and rejected it.

"Need I the world, Solomon? The world is already Mine, for Mine was the hand that created it out of nothingness, and Mine was the breath that breathed life into the creatures of the land and of the sea and into man himself! Could you give Me a greater gift?"

His forehead bled where he scraped it in the sand.

"I gave you wisdom, and you blinded yourself by your lusts! A pagan queen became greater in your eyes than Me and Mine!"

Writhing, Solomon lay upon the sands.

"On a hill of dead men, you would offer Me world

conquest! For My glory—or for thine, Solomon? Do you not know the truth—that Mine is a spiritual kingdom, which can be found only within a man, and not upon the trappings with which he adorns his body?"

Exhausted in body and in spirit, Solomon lay like a dead man. Once before, Yahweh had spoken with him, on Mount Gibeon, when He had offered Solomon the gift of wisdom.

"In the love I bear thee, I forgive thee. Yet you shall be punished. But that your punishment shall not be as that of the idolator, I shall end it soon, so that you can rise in your strength and your wisdom and weld my kingdom of Israel into all its power! I shall bless thee, Solomon, and make thy name a glory unto all men, as long as men shall inhabit the earth! Go now and fear not, for since I am always with you, how shall any defeat you?"

The light came then, bright and white and blazing. It grew from the red sand and the wind, and its glory was as the sun at high noon, except that it did not burn. Solomon rose to his knees and sat back on his sandaled heels and stared into the middle of that light. His lips moved, but he made no sound. His eyes widened, but he saw nothing but the light.

"Lord God of Israel! God of the Covenant! Dweller in the Ark! Yahweh!"

The light was gone.

The simoom was no more. The sand lay still and tranquil and the day was clear. Above, the sky was blue, and only a tiny white cloud was there, scudding before a cool breeze off the Inland Sea.

Solomon was on his feet, standing tall and straight. His head was flung back as he breathed deeply of the faint salt tang of that sea wind. Fled with the sands and the simoom was his despair. Once again he was strong, with the strength of Yahweh in him.

"Benajah!"

Benajah rolled away from his horse and stared. Then he knuckled his eyes. "The simoom! Never does it depart so swiftly!"

"Forget the simoom, Benajah. Concentrate instead on what lies ahead of us. Jothab rides with Philistia against Israel. Not against me, for I am nothing but the symbol of our people, appointed to stand as a bulwark before them, for their protection. This is Yahweh's will! Now, into the saddle!"

Benajah stared a moment. This was a new Solomon, a man transfigured through some inner radiance, by a conviction of spirit that what he did was with the will of the Lord. With such an assurance always in him, he could not fail. And yet, with all that, there was a strange, new humility in him.

As it made him a stronger man, so this new understanding would make him a greater king.

Chapter Eight

ANOHBET PACED the level space between the hide tents, unable to sleep. The summer night was warm, and over her thin Grecian chiton she wore only a large cloak of Chaldean wool. A guard in bronze cuirass and greaves, with a round cap helmet on his head, leaned on a spear and watched her. The man was a Judean veteran, one of several hundred who had come at the summons of Nathan to protect them in their flight from Jerusalem.

"Two hundred Israelites against ten times that number of Philistines," she whispered.

Jothab was moving south from Gaza now, swinging below Beersheba and Azad, hunting them. Chariots rattled in his van, driven by hardened veterans, each with a chosen spearman at his side. Archers in mail shirts walked behind the chariots, and hard-bitten swordsmen, who could come in the final rush to hit an enemy and destroy him. There would be Israelite fighting men in that army too, Anohbet knew. These and other things her spies told her, when they slipped through the lines of their little camp.

The numbers of their enemies were as the waters of the oceans, and they pressed upon her and put faint lines in her face that none of the ointments in the clay and diorite jars could remove. For a little while, in her turmoil of mind, she wished that she were back in the palaces along the Nile, safe with her father; but she rejected that, after a little thought.

"A queen is not a queen until she has faced trouble, and conquered it," she told herself.

It was not the trouble that bothered her so much as it

was the waiting, and the uncertainty of Solomon's willingness to return to stand by her side against their common enemy. If that woman called Balkis—word had come to her ears of what had happened in Saba, through the lips of the three Egyptian ambassadors who had returned to Thebes—retained her hold on Solomon, all the spearmen from Sela to the city Dan could not help her.

In her anxiety, she walked away from the skin tents, out onto the level flats that lay on the rim of the Zin wilderness. In the bright moonlight she could see the prophet Nathan seated on a flat stone, leaning on his staff, staring off toward the south.

Anohbet went to join him.

He turned at her faint footfall, and he smiled.

"You could not sleep either, my daughter?"

"I could not sleep. I keep thinking of Solomon, wondering whether he will come. Wondering, too, what will happen when he gets here."

"All that is in the hands of Yahweh."

"If only I could believe that!" she cried vehemently. "Just once to have proof that this God my husband worships is the true God he insists He is! Can you prove Him greater than Amon-Ra? Than Hathor? Will He bring Solomon back to me?"

Nathan stretched out a wrinkled hand, clasping her trembling fingers. His dark eyes were brilliant with tenderness. "You are a foreign woman, Anohbet, and my people do not look kindly on strange women. Yet Solomon loves you, and it comes to me that Yahweh Himself has chosen you as His instrument. So I must love you too, and, loving you, assure you that He is the only God. All others are things of stone and wood and precious metal. Objects man has made with his hands."

She sat a while with bowed head, yearning inside herself for comfort. For a long time now, ever since she had come from her land of Egypt, she had walked alone, in

pride and an arrogance of spirit. Now she found herself alone in truth, and praying before the painted statues of Isis and Hathor brought her nothing of peace and serenity.

Nathan studied her a moment. Hesitating, he asked, "Do you wish me to pray with you, Anohbet? Shall we pray together to Yahweh for the return of Solomon?"

"I have prayed to my gods, and they do not hear me. Will it help to pray to your God?"

"Not to my God alone. To the God of all. To God Himself, who is Yahweh!"

Anohbet walked with long strides back and forth, away from the flat stone and back to it. Emotion stormed in her, revealing itself by the flutter of her bosom and the manner in which she clasped and unclasped her hands.

"Pray, then! Pray that Solomon returns! If this Yahweh is so great, He will have Solomon here beside me by the first light of dawn!"

Nathan sighed. "You ask the impossible. Sheba is far away. Even the fastest horses—"

"My way, or not at all!"

Nathan slid from the rock and knelt in the dirt. In the moonlight, his long white hair and beard seemed fashioned of pale silver. His lips moved and Anohbet had to strain to hear the words he poured into the night. For a long time Nathan prayed, with Anohbet brooding down at him, clutching the woolen shawl tight about her.

Then he was done and he stood up, leaning heavily upon his almondwood staff. When she looked at him, it seemed that an inner glory shone from his eyes.

"Solomon will come, Anohbet. He will come as dawn touches the skin tents!"

Anohbet shivered. Suddenly a great weariness was on her, and her lids felt heavy. Turning, she stumbled through the moonlight to her tent. I will sleep now, she thought. When it is day, Solomon will be here, and I will have someone on whom to lean, as Nathan leans on Yahweh.

Jothab watched the shepherds of the northern Negeb being herded together like their own sheep, at the points of Philistine spears. A sickness was in him, compounded of shame and anger. From the corners of his eyes he looked at King Omri, wide and heavy-set in purple robe and golden armor, sitting a nervously sidling Theban gelding. Beyond him was the gold-and-ebony litter in which his daughter Candia lay at ease.

Candia of Philistia, his wife!

Despite the sickness that was in him, his heart leaped to the sight of her smooth thigh where it thrust from a slit in the thin tunic she wore, girdled by sliver rings at her lissom waist. Her entire body was smooth and white, like that thigh. It was soft and warm, and very skilled in the love arts. Jothab felt a muscle in his throat jerk to life at the memory of the nights they had spent in the big purple tent on this march across southern Israel.

Between them, Omri and Candia were ruling his life. Omri commanded him by day; Candia governed him at night.

No longer did he have a body to call his own. Even now, while Philistine spearmen rounded up Hebrew shepherds and stole their flocks from them for food, he dared make no objection. Candia would laugh at him, honestly amused at his provincialism, while Omri would stare at him blandly, as if he were a trained hound barking in command to an order.

A shepherd stumbled and a soldier kicked him hard.

Jothab cried out and drove his horse forward. The soldier skipped nimbly out of his path and retreated a few steps. They're under orders not to oppose me, Jothab thought, and a flush of shame crept from his silver collar to the curls of his black hair. He came from the saddle to the ground and put an arm around the old man who lay unmoving on the grass.

"Let me help you, Father," he said.

The old man tore himself loose and spat at him. "I need no help from such as you. Go to your Philistine harlot, and stay away from honest Hebrew shepherds."

A young man came and took the other by a wrist and drew him after him, toward the big acacia-wood fence that formed a stockade filled with prisoners. Jothab stared after them, a kind of horror rising in him. Was this to be the attitude of all Israel toward him? Would they look on him as a usurper of Solomon's throne? A traitor to his own kind? He would need Philistine spears always at his back then, for protection. He would be no better than a petty king under Omri.

Omri growled, "I'll have that old fleabeard flayed alive if you say the word. Be a good idea, too. Teach these others that we demand obedience and respect."

"No," said Jothab heavily.

Wearily he went to his horse and swung up into the plain leather saddle. He was no traitor. No more so than was Absalom or Adonijah. True, they had brought Israelites with them against other Israelites, but he brought only Philistines under a treaty. When he was crowned king in Jerusalem, Omri and his warriors would go back to Gaza and Ashkalon. Then he would prove himself a better ruler than Solomon!

He went with Omri to gaze down at the roasting sheep, stolen from his people to feed his army. There were more than dead sheep piled in neat rows close by the twin purple tents that belonged to King Omri and to Candia and himself. Jewels were on display in metal coffers, and fine rings and bracelets, pottery and vials of perfume. Thick shawls and woolen robes colored with the finest Tyrian dye, ornate shields and horse trappings, rich leather reins for chariots were piled high for division later, after victory.

This was loot, plain and simple.

Loot from the tiny Hebraic cities of Dargal and Macah,

wrenched from shops and stalls by hard-handed Philistine warriors in helmets and chain mail. A portion of it belonged to them, for this was the law of war. The soldier fought for what riches he could steal from raped and plundered cities. Dargal and Macah were dead, charred places now, for when the looting and the ravishing were over, men went riding with lighted torches, setting fire to what was left.

The screams of the men and women who had been in the burning cities still rang in Jothab's ears. In accordance with custom, the prettiest of the maidens and the matrons had been taken by the officers, and by as many of the common soldiers as they could be distributed among without causing fights.

Your people, Jothab. Men and women of the race of Abraham. Men who wear the *tallith*, women who prepare the proper foods according to the law. It is your hand that has given them over to the enemy.

"It is war," said a soft voice at his side.

Candia smiled at him. Her eyes were bright with antimony, and gold dust was sprinkled on their lids. In her thin purple tunic, through which his eyes could see the tint of her otherwise naked flesh, she was very alluring and persuasive.

"They are my people," he said hoarsely. "We steal and kill and treat them like enemies."

Candia looked surprised. "They *are* enemies, Jothab. Your enemies. My enemies. For they are loyal to Solomon, who is still the king in Israel. Have you forgotten that? I know you feel pity and sorrow for them, and I admire that in you. But to be a king means that you must also be hard of heart, and pitiless, when pity will only stand in the way of what you wish to do."

Glumly he listened, telling himself that these words she poured out at him were truth, and that in his sensitiveness he was proving too weak to be a king. Candia

leaned against him and his arm went around her waist.

"It will only be for a little while, this requisitioning and killing," she whispered. "Once we find and kill Solomon, we will not have to do this kind of thing any more. You will be king, and can order food to feed your army."

"Yes, yes. Of course!"

"Now put all this from your mind and smile! We shall dine together in the tent, and sleep against the noontime sun. Would you like that, dearest husband?"

Jothab felt a stir of eagerness. More than once he had dined with Candia in their large tent, on big cushions, since they had come from Gaza. Always she grew flushed and loving with wines, and strangely languorous with the heat. Hour after hour she amused and entertained him with her body, until it seemed that they lived in a little world of their own, cut off from all reality.

Dimly he was aware that riders came and went on lathered horses, and that King Omri saw them and issued orders, and sent other riders out on different errands. Jothab knew that he should sit where Omri sat, and give those orders, and make decisions, but it was so much easier and so much more pleasant to kiss Candia and stroke her flesh than bother himself with such matters.

Daily this army of Philistines was growing around him. Men were marching in from the seacoast cities and from the hills around Debit and the valley of Elah. Canaanites from Gath and Hebron, too, were lifting up their swords and shields, and even some restless Israelites—outlaws and renegades from the law, who saw a chance to profit by a change of rulers in Jerusalem—came flocking in to add to the throng.

There was no need for him to concern himself. Omri would handle things in a proper manner. He was a fool for being so tenderhearted about his own people. Let them swear allegiance to him, if they wanted to protect their flocks and their wives and daughters!

"A king can be a king only by being hard," Candia whispered to him as she let the tent flap fall behind them.

Time enough to be king when he sat on the gold-and-ivory throne in Jerusalem! Right now, Candia was loosing the Persian cloak she wore, letting it fall to the carpeted floor, walking ahead of him between the standing oil lamps that made her linen tunic turn to purple mist.

As he took the silver goblet of red Gelboan wine she poured, Jothab felt a fleeting moment of inanity. He was no more than a stud for this Philistine woman, incapable of anything other than giving her pleasure. Time enough to play king, however, when the crown was put on his head!

Her tinted lips were flavored with the wine. They caught him up in a swirl of pleasure. Her body was on fire in the purple tunic as it moved lazily against him.

"Rest yourself, husband dear. Lie upon the cushions. I will be your slave girl, and serve you."

As he sank onto the yielding pillows, Candia put a hand to the jeweled brooch that held the tunic to her shoulder. It slipped, falling, to the silver chain that girdled her waist. Then she was unclasping the metal belt and dropping it, standing proudly as the linen pooled at her feet.

Wearing her red leather sandals, she went to bring him meat and freshly baked bread, then an amphora of wine. Staring at her, finding it difficult to breathe, Jothab felt all care and anxiety slide from him.

Outside the tent, a new batch of Hebrew prisoners was being herded toward the acacia stockade, but Jothab did not hear this. All he could hear was the wild, exultant pounding of his heart.

Solomon came in the first red rays of dawn.

On an exhausted horse he thundered past the guards, an arm uplifted in greeting. The skin tents were emptying of half-dazed soldiers, with slumber still in their eyes,

but at sight of Solomon their voices throbbed with shouts. They came around him with laughter and excitement on their lips and in their eyes. Hands reached out to touch him and aid him from the saddle.

"Anohbet?" he asked hoarsely. "And Nathan?"

Nathan was striding forward through the morning mists, his staff moving rhythmically with every stride. From under thick white brows, his dark eyes blazed triumphantly.

"I prayed to Yahweh, Solomon! At the request of Anohbet, I prayed. Now you are here, by the dawn!"

Even through his tiredness, Solomon was surprised. "You prayed to Yahweh, at the request of Anohbet?"

Nathan smiled faintly. "She has lost faith in Horus and Isis. Go to her, Solomon. She is your queen, chosen as such by Yahweh. Favored of Him!"

Solomon made a strange figure in his stained robe, with the sands of the desert still on his black hair, where his hand had poured it in his abasement. His dark eyes blazed in the grime and sun bronze of his lean face. The pulse of exaltation still beat in him as his ears recalled the words of his God. He was the favored one, the man chosen to stand in leadership over his people. Yahweh was with him, always at his side. There seemed a glory to the dust on his cloak, and to the dirt smeared on his face and in his curling black hair. His chest lifted and fell, and his head was held high.

"I spoke myself with Yahweh, Nathan. Face to face in the desert, and my God talked to me." His hands opened and closed, and his voice grew stronger and clearer. "He promised me the victory over Jothab. For my past sins I will be punished, but I am still the king."

Anohbet came to the front of her tent, lifting the flap. She stood looking at Solomon, and when he felt the weight of her eyes he turned and stared at her. Incredible that I should feel shock at her sultry beauty, he thought, after I have known Balkis! The wonder was there, and

the humility, as it always had been, but now he felt the power in him. It blazed from his eyes and it shook the woman in the tent.

Never before had Anohbet seen Solomon like this: almost a demigod in his pride and wisdom and certainty of self. Her muscles stiffened in reaction to his look, and languor ran through her veins, softening her middle. The hand that held the skin flap of the tent trembled a little.

"Welcome, my lord Solomon," she whispered.

He turned from Nathan and the soldiers, and went toward her. Her knees trembled a little, and fright and a swimming delight were in her body. This man belonged to her! His flesh was her flesh, his spirit a reflection of her own. She knew that no other man in all the world was her king, no matter what his gods might be.

Nathan had prayed to Yahweh. Now Solomon was here, and and the dawn was only minutes old! A strong contempt and fury against Horus and Amon-Ra and Isis was being born within her.

Solomon paused when they almost touched.

"I have come back to you, Anohbet. There is no woman but you for me. The proof of this I will write in the blood of our enemies. Then, later, when you are once again queen in Jerusalem—"

His voice fell away to silence, but his eyes talked to her, and when she read the wildness and the fierceness in them, her eyes closed and she swayed a little. This man was not the Solomon of Israel she had known. He was Solomon and more than Solomon: He was a girlhood dream come to life, a dream image clothed with the flesh of reality.

Solomon said slowly, "I am tired. I will have food and a little wine, and then my captains shall come to me."

Anohbet stood aside to let him pass inside the tent, to the cushions where she had slept so feverishly this past night. Her body scent was still on those soft Median pillows, and she saw him pause a moment as he savored it.

Then he was sitting crosslegged and gesturing at the silver salvers that held barley bread and meat and a basket of olives.

"Sit with me, Anohbet, for you are queen of Israel, and what I say to my captains you also must know."

This was a rare concession by a ruler, admitting his wife to his counsels. Anohbet flushed with pride, and went to sink beside him, a little below his height. Her chin was high, and her fine Egyptian profile was as if cut from rare chalcedony. Beneath her thin byssus tunic, her heart slammed savagely in triumph.

Solomon ate as his captains came and knelt to him.

They gave him the truth, for each of them saw something in his black eyes that prevented them from lying.

King Omri of Philistia was close at hand. Jothab and Candia were with him, together with the hard core of the Philistine army. Mercenaries from the cities of Canaan were flocking to his bull standard, together with a handful of Egyptian wanderers and Assyrian renegades. The Israelites, too, were rousing up with Jothab—mostly men of the tribes of Reuben and Gad in Sihon and the lands of Moab, for these countries were east of the Dead Sea and sometimes felt themselves cut off from the favored peoples closer to Jerusalem.

A big army and a hard army, with each man protected by a plate-mail shirt, equipped with a shield and a spear: this was the force they faced.

The men of Philistia were descended from the broken remnants of that island culture that had reached its peak in Crete five hundred years before. The knowledge of metal and the working of metal was in their blood. Even when Moses and Joshua had brought the Israelites out of the wilderness, from Egypt along the coast of the Red Sea to Mount Sinai and on to the Promised Land, these people had been clever artificers of bronze and iron. Their soldiers always were the best equipped in this corner of

the world. Even David and Saul, with their victories, had not smashed the martial spirit and the military wealth of these people.

"We have few men in mail or corselets, Solomon," said a burly captain from Ephraim. "They carry spears and shields, but wear only wool against the iron points of the Philistines."

"We are outnumbered, and outweighed in metal," said Solomon, lifting a torn strip of barley bread. "But I promise you this: The victory shall be ours. Perhaps not today or tomorrow, but eventually."

The captains stood and brooded down at him. They knew the legend of his wisdom, but they were hardheaded realists who had fought against the Philistines before. One of them growled a little in his throat.

"The time for miracles is over, Solomon. Once your father killed a giant with a stone from his sling, but David is dead some years."

Solomon laughed in warm delight. "My father told me many times how he killed Goliath of Gath. The army of Saul was frightened of the enemy. No man dared lift his eyes to stare the Gathite in the face. They were even more paralyzed than you, for they had less armor—most of them were slingers, my father said—and nobody ever had beaten the Philistines before."

An officer said dryly, "Are you another David, Solomon?"

"I'm his son, which is almost the same thing, or as near as a man can get in this world to another man. If you want a miracle, Yahweh will work a miracle."

"Jothab is also David's son!"

"Has Yahweh ever spoken with Jothab, man of Dan?"

The officers looked nonplused. They were getting out of their depth with this talk of Yahweh. Of course, they held themselves to be good men, with maybe a shapely tavern wench or Canaanite harlot to tempt them some-

times, and a flagon of Cretan wine to fuddle their wits when things got too much for them. On the whole, though, they were as upright as any. Yet their talk was better when it came to swords and shields, and the disposal of men on a field of battle.

An older captain said nervously, "We are your men, Solomon. You know that. We wouldn't be here if we weren't. We just ask you to consider the odds, and act accordingly."

"I will consider. By nightfall, I shall order an attack."

Their jaws unhinged and their mouths opened. One man tried to speak, but only croaked hoarsely. They shuffled their feet and looked at one another, and when Solomon waved a hand they moved backward toward the tent flap without a sound. Only their eyes were accusing as they bowed to their king.

Solomon said thoughtfully, "They account me mad. If they think me possessed of devils, what will Omri think?"

Anohbet smiled faintly. "When he learns the truth, he will marvel at your daring. As I, myself, marvel now."

Bitterly Solomon said, "What else is left to me? To run, and give away the secret of my weakness? To hide, and make my name a shame in Israel? Where are my chariots from Megiddo? Where are my spearmen, my archers? Has all the world forgotten Solomon, because I went away to Sheba?"

Anohbet rose to her feet and moved to the little serving table carved from ivory and fitted with ebony mosaics. She lifted a crater of red wine and a sliver goblet and brought them to Solomon. Filling the goblet with the Arsinoite, she handed it to him.

"Drink, my king. You need nourishment and sleep."

His eyes ran over her, lifting from the slim brown ankles and the tiny feet shod in palm-leaf sandals up the slim, straight legs to the rounded hips that traced their outline through the misty Egyptian linen.

"I only went away to Sheba because of you," he said heavily.

"What would you find in Sheba that you could not find in Jerusalem?"

He laughed harshly. "Bows! Fine bows that could make a man master of the world. Aye! Or put a madness in his blood that blinded him to everything but his own selfishness. That's why I went, for the bows. But I could have secured the bows in some other manner, I suppose. If I'd wanted to stay in Jerusalem, I could have thought of a way."

His eyes blazed in his gaunt face.

"Nathan tells me you prayed to your Egyptian gods for my safety, and they failed to answer you. He tells me that you asked him then to pray to Yahweh."

"Your Yahweh heard my prayers. At least, you came in the dawn, as I woke from sleep."

There was uncertainty in her voice. It is not easy to throw over the beliefs of a lifetime. Solomon recognized this, and smiled slowly.

"Yahweh will give you further proof of His power, Anohbet. Before we come again to Jerusalem, He will do this. I promise you."

Anohbet shivered before the hunger in his eyes. That hunger touched a wellspring of desire that lay hidden deep inside her loins. A stir of sensuality rippled through her brown flesh. She wanted this gaunt, tired man to look at her body and to want it. Ever since she had married him, she had felt that yearning starvation in his eyes. Now it was different. The first crack had been placed in the wall of her religious beliefs. Perhaps Horus was not the magical god whose power had restored Osiris to life, after all. It might even be that Isis was not the spirit of fecundity, or Set the god of the dead.

If those gods were false, then Yahweh was the true God!

The Egyptian woman shivered. Why, if Yahweh were the One God, then nothing would keep Solomon from her arms. All she asked of him was that he worship as she worshiped. Still, she did not want him to bow down before mere names or mere statues of stone and wood.

She found herself saying, "Let Yahweh prove Himself to me, Solomon! Let Him do that!"

"What will you demand as proof?"

"Victory over Jothab and Philistia! Complete victory!"

Solomon breathed faster. His body began to tremble as his eyes read the love that swam in the eyes of his Egyptian wife.

"Go to the tent opening," he whispered. "Close it and tie it tightly."

Her legs were rubbery things, carrying her to the flaps. She loosed them, watched them fall into place. Nerveless fingers secured the tie thongs. She knotted each one twice, fussing over them as weakness flooded her body. She did not dare to face him. This languid fright that filled her veins was an emotion she had never known before. It terrified her, even as it filled her with a wild, searing pleasure.

Turning, she put her back to the tent flaps.

Solomon sat like a statue. From his face her eyes went to the tiny altar behind which, on a shelf, were ranged the figures of Hathor, the love goddess, her golden headdress topped by the cow's horn and solar disc, and of Harahkte, the hawk-headed. Done in ivory, these statues sat beside the standing figures of Osiris and Isis and Horus, whose bodies were fashioned of polished ebony set with decorations of yellow gold.

Kneeling at that tiny altar, she had offered incense and food to her gods. More than one night her eyes had blurred with tiredness as she beseeched Osiris to return her husband to her. They had ignored her. Only Yahweh heard her prayers.

Yahweh was everywhere, Solomon said. He had no need of brazen images or figurines done in ivory and ebony. He was inside a man and outside. He was in the dust of the ground and the water in a well. He was the Spirit of Life, the Father welcoming the sons of man home in death.

Anohbet walked forward.

She came to a stop a foot away from the seated Solomon. "Loosen your cloak," he told her. "Then undo your girdle and slip off your tunic."

The blood in her veins was a swollen spring freshet thundering over the edge of the cataract. A trembling hand unfastened the silver brooch at her shoulder so that her woolen cloak could fall behind her. Then the belt of golden solar emblems dropped from her waist. Her arms lifted to catch the straps of her tunic and draw them down.

Anohbet stood naked before Solomon.

With his eyes he caressed her, and told her of the wild love that hammered inside him. Motionless he sat, living only in the eyes that stroked her flesh and caressed her limbs. The restraint with which he forced his muscles to sit idle beat out from him in thick, blinding waves.

"Turn around," he said softly, and the yearning in his throat almost brought Anohbet to her knees.

Hathor herself was not the love goddess she was, posing here like this! No worshiper ever drank in the sight of his love goddess as Solomon drank her in with his fiery gaze.

"You are lovelier than any other woman in the world," he told her. "I want you more than I want anything else, even the throne in Jerusalem. I could take you now by force, but I do not want you that way. I want you as I know you can be, deep in my heart.

"When we have come again into Jerusalem, and you acknowledge that Yahweh is the only God, then you and

I will love as it was meant for us to love. Now put on your tunic and your robe."

Anohbet bent and lifted her tunic. Her sultry eyes were steady on his face. "Was Balkis lovelier than I?"

Easily he rose to his feet and came to stand before her. Where her hair was heaviest, hanging down her back, he put his hand, taking a handful of the thick black wig hair. His mouth took her lips and there was fire in them both that made them strain together wildly.

When he drew back a little, he whispered, "You are lovelier than the sunset, more feverish than the desert simoom. You are a storm on the great inland sea, and the peace of a tranquil afternoon. You are all things to me."

Her throat worked spasmodically, trying to frame an answer to the worship in his eyes. When she realized that her tongue was frozen in her mouth she leaned against him, trembling. Her very pores were filled with love for this man, but for all that, there was a tiny jab of hate within her.

From where she rested her cheek on his dusty cloak, she could look sideways at the altar and see the statued gods of Egypt. Those gods had kept her from this man, and had wasted the years of her life.

Hate for the gods of Egypt grew and blossomed in her bosom.

Men moved silently through the night. On sandaled feet they went beneath the stars, with mud caked on their spear points and on their shields and helmets. Muffling robes were wrapped tightly around their plate mail, or over the naked skin of their chests. They crept in orderly fashion across the gravelly ground, down toward the cone tents of the Philistines in the valley below.

Solomon went with Benajah, at their head.

All that day they had made their preparations for this hour of the night. Spies had come and gone: shepherd

boys who watched the Philistines in their camp, noting the arrangement of the soldiers and the places where they stacked their spears, and burly men in dusty tunics whose eyes had seen where the war chariots were placed, and the great rope corrals that held the horses that pulled them. The skin tents were empty now, save for the tents where Nathan prayed and where Anohbet sat staring at her Egyptian gods. Every man and boy who could wield a weapon walked behind their king.

Where the gnarled and twisted branches of a *shittah* tree stood in lonely defiance of the wilderness, Solomon pulled Benajah to a halt.

"We split up here. I go down to the weapon racks. You go to the prisoner stockades. You know our signal?"

"The yelp of a jackal will tell me you've gone into action."

Solomon nodded and pushed Benajah. "Go now. And be fast!"

He waited, crouched to the cool ground. His hand worked on the hilt of his iron sword as a fierceness grew inside him. It was not for himself he fought this night, but for Yahweh, Whose will would have him, rather than Jothab, seated on the Israelite throne. And for Anohbet, too, who was beginning to learn that Yahweh was no painted image, but a living God Who loved and protected His people. There was no thought of failure in him. What man could fail, when Yahweh stood at his side to guide and counsel him? Once he shifted his body against a muscle cramp, reminding himself that he must give Benajah time to reach the acacia poles.

The camp lay still, below. Here and there he saw a touch of starshine from the helmet of a drowsing guard.

Solomon rose to his feet. As one man, his men rose up behind him.

They went down a narrow footpath, one man behind the other. The mud caked on their weapons prevented

their brightness from shining. They moved silently, like an army of shadows.

Two hands caught a Philistine guard around his throat and choked the air from his lungs until the man died. Then the shadow figures moved on until the piled spears and shields of the Philistines were at their elbows.

A jackal yelped.

Before the echoes of that eerie cry were fading, fire was blossoming under the spear handles, licking upward redly. Hoarse voices were crying out as the Philistine guards realized that something was wrong. Swords flashed naked. Spears were lifted by steady hands above heavily muscled shoulders.

"For Yahweh!" roared Solomon, and sprang forward. "Yahweh! Yahweh!"

Those hoarse voices sounded doom in the night as Philistines staggered from their tents to drop before thrusting spear points and slashing swords. Men waked from heavy slumber need time to adjust to the sight of bearded faces and brilliant eyes, to the slash of iron and the stab of red bronze. The Philistines were given no time by the running, leaping Israelites and hired Hittite mercenaries.

The fire flames lit the camp, blinding the Philistines. With the fire at their backs, the attackers saw clearly each man who came staggering out of a lifting tent flap or lay petrified before the intrusion of grim figures stabbing downward with sword and spear. Men died in their sleeping furs, without even a dagger for the fingers that clutched the ground beneath them in the agony of death, as bloody bronze was pulled out of their chests and bellies. Here and there a woman screamed, too, for there was no time for the Israelites to distinguish between soldier and camp follower.

A deeper roar lifted above the cone tents as the Israelite prisoners came surging from the acacia-wood stockade. Fire began to eat at those dry poles now. Two roaring

bonfires blazed in the night, and the Philistines were living sacrifices to the fury of the Israelites.

For a moment, as he withdrew his blade from a dying soldier, Solomon considered staking everything on this one savage attack. Four hundred men ran at his back, but there were nearly ten times that number in the cone tents. Surprise was with them up to this point, but more and more men were coming from the Philistine tents, and surprise was no longer a factor.

The swift stabbing death that his men were bringing the enemy in that first forward surge was yielding now to individual battles, where order was coming out of chaos. These were no initiates, these men who fought behind the Dagon standards of Omri of Gaza. They were toughened veterans, who would not panic.

A jackal yelped again.

The animal cry was picked up and passed along, from man to man.

King Omri heard those yelps as he stood in the light of his tent lamps, being fitted with a bronze cuirass ornamented with silver mountings. His greaves were already strapped to his short, thick legs. A slave was buckling the thick belt that held his gold-knobbed sword.

"They run," he rumbled. "I know their tricks from old times, when I fought with Achish of Gath against David."

He did not bother with a shield or helmet, but ran out into the night with bare head. Breathing deeply, he scanned his confused camp. Men were running naked, or with scraps of linen at their loins. A file of slingers from Ashdod went past his tent at the trot, their stone pouches bouncing at their hips, long leather slings wound tightly about their fists.

"Pelim! Acheron! Cherish!" he roared.

His voice bugled in the firelit darkness as he summoned his captains.

Jothab heard that call as he lay tangled in the cushion

silks with Candia. Her arms clung to him, holding him beside her.

"Do not leave me! Do not go!" she pleaded. "Let Father attend to them. Please, Jothab!"

Never before had Candia begged him like this. It was a pleasant sensation to know she cared so fervently for him. Almost fiercely she writhed on top of his body, as if to press it down deeper into the yielding silks and furs with her weight. Her mouth whispered at the corner of his lips as her hot palms roved up his arms and over his shoulders.

"You are a king in Israel, Jothab! The fighting is not for you. Lesser men can do that. Stay with me. Protect me! What will happen if you go and those Israelites find me alone and unguarded?"

Her flesh trembled as she buried her face in his throat, clinging savagely to his shoulders. It did not occur to Jothab until much later that Candia concerned herself with him not because he was the man she loved, but because he was the only man who could give her a golden crown for her black hair and an ivory throne on which to seat her curving rump.

Chapter Nine

The Wilderness of Zin was a barren land. Its gravel flats and low hummocks of dead sand, hurled by the simoom from the great desert that lay to the southeast, were brown and arid. It was essentially a limestone plateau, with deep valleys gouged out and filled with rock debris and loose shale. Its vast wasteland was broken only by low hills that were comprised of the same dead earth and stone that filled the lowlands.

Through this empty land came Moses at the time of the exodus from Egypt. Legend said that it was on the rocks of Kadesh that he tapped his rod to bring forth a spring of water. Moses did not know, at that time, the direction of his travels. He knew only that he was promised a land of milk and honey as his goal. Blindly he went on, believing and trusting in the Lord.

Solomon thought of Moses as the wheels of his chariot rattled across the shale ground of Zin. He likened himself to the prophet, in that he fled before the power of Philistia as Moses fled from Rameses II, who had been pharaoh at the time. As Moses sought a promised land, so he sought a promised victory.

His eyes looked sideways at Anohbet, who rode beside him in the jouncing chariot. The wind whipped her wig hair back, and held the cloak plastered to her body. Laughter was on her full red lips, and a shining delight glistened in her eyes. Solomon shook his head glumly. Never, never would he understand this Egyptian woman! In the palace at Jerusalem she had been like a *golem,* dead inside her flesh. Now she was vivid and quick, laughing and teasing. It was as if she drew sustenance from the very air.

Perhaps that was a good thing. The food supplies were low, and unless they sighted the oasis of En Mishpat within a day or two, they would be out of water. Even now, the skin sacks sagged with dangerous limpness.

The army came after them, marching steadily in the heat. After the surprise attack on Omri of Gaza, a new spirit burned inside the troops, as if they knew they fought for a destiny that could not be denied. Solomon encouraged this. He spoke constantly of improvements he would make in Jerusalem, and upon the enlargement and extension of the seaport city of Ezion-Geber, which would harbor his yet-to-be-built trading ships, when he and Anohbet sat once again upon their thrones.

The freed prisoners of the acacia stockades walked with the soldiers, clad in assorted helmets and armor. Some were weaponless, except for crude clubs, but all thirsted for vengeance on the Philistines, even more than they thirsted for the brackish waters of En Mishpat.

Solomon dispatched riders to the north, who rode to find his chariots from Megiddo. He sent horsemen to the south, along the caravan route that wound past Tema and Dumah, through Ophir into Sheba.

Spies visited him with news of the Philistine army. From them he learned that Omri raged, and in his rage grew more cautious than before. Guards were posted hourly, and the penalty for dozing was burial alive. In the fury of his pride, he drove his army with the whiplash of his tongue. Solomon was before him. Solomon was the only barrier that stood between Jothab and the throne. Find Solomon! Kill Solomon! This was the order of his day.

They came to the spring of En Mishpat at midday. Tents went up and horses were freed of their headstalls and led away from the harness poles to be watered and fed. Then the men bathed their faces and drank slowly, so as not to cause stomach spasms. After that they filled the waterskins until they bulged.

Nathan prayed before the kneeling army, his arms uplifted, his face bright with devotion. Solomon knelt before the prophet, and with him crouched Benajah.

Anohbet stood indecisive at her tent, watching. She felt an inner force pulling her, like iron to the lodestone, but the images of her gods were ranged behind the tent altar and she could not put them from her mind. Once she saw Solomon turn his head and look at her, and her knees trembled. Let Yahweh give him victory! Then she would abase herself with Solomon before his God. Then she would welcome Solomon as a man in her tent bed.

After the praying, barley bread and roast lamb were served to the army. Men sat about tiny campfires talking.

Solomon ate with Anohbet, seated on silken cushions. They ate the plain fare of the soldiers and drank water mixed with wine.

When the lamps were lighted, Nathan came and sat on a low ebony camp stool and spoke with them of Yahweh. In the beginning, he told Anohbet, Yahweh appeared to Abraham, who lived in the ancient city of Ur. Of course, He had been known to His people before that, but then they were only wandering nomads, and there were no records kept of such a distant time. From Ur in the land of Shinar, which was close to Babylon, Abraham had come with Sarah, his wife, traveling through Canaan and on to Egypt. He was the guiding spirit of his people, their beacon and the staff on which they leaned.

Anohbet learned of Hagar and her son Ishmael, and of Isaac, who was born eventually to Abraham and Sarah. When Nathan spoke of the moment when Abraham stood on Mount Moriah with the sacrificial knife in his hand above Isaac, whom he was offering to Yahweh, she trembled and came closer into Solomon's arm.

"You must learn all these things, Anohbet." Solomon smiled. "For how can one believe what he or she does not understand?"

Isaac did not die. Yahweh saved him, and brought him twin sons in Esau and Jacob: the hunter and the student. When Nathan told how Jacob had cunningly bought the birthright of Esau with lentil stew, she smiled; and later, when she learned of the seven years of hard labor with which Jacob sought to win Rachel, only to find Leah substituted for her in the marriage bed, and of how he then labored seven years more to win the true bride of his heart, she sympathized with soft murmurs.

Until the lamps burned low, Nathan spoke, making Anohbet see the coat of many colors that was stolen from Joseph by his brothers, making her remember the tales she had heard in her own Egypt, where Joseph served her distant ancestor so well as his governor. Nathan spoke of Moses, and the forty years of wandering through the lands of Elim and Paran, and through this very Wilderness of Zin, where they themselves were camped.

"Even on this ground where your tent poles rest, Moses may have stood," said Nathan, and there was awe in his voice.

Solomon smiled. "The rest of the story you already know. How first Joshua and then Saul and finally my father, David, subdued and won the land of Canaan."

Her sultry eyes brooded at him. "I know all that, Solomon. What bothers me now is this: will we be able to keep what they won?"

Nathan frowned, but Solomon shouted laughter. He stood and swung her up in his arms, hands widespread under her armpits. "You will be queen of a city and a land that will go down for all time as a symbol of wealth and luxury. On my iron sword I promise it!"

There was such confidence in his voice that Anohbet was forced to believe him. She let herself soften against him, and burrowed her face against his throat. "Let Yahweh give me that, and I will believe in Him," she told him languorously.

The old prophet cleared his throat. It pleased him to see his king and his queen so gay with one another. Leaning heavily on his almondwood staff, for he was a very old man in these days, he walked from the tent and out across the gravelly soil of the land of Zin.

In a little while, Solomon followed him. Watching, Nathan frowned. After such a laughing beginning, he had been sure that Solomon would spend the night with Anohbet. When he remembered Saul and David, it seemed that young men were not what they had been in his own youth. Shaking his white head dolefully, he moved away, staff tapping gently against the hard stones at every stride.

Nathan did not know the bargain Anohbet had with Solomon.

Solomon was keenly aware of that covenant between them. He lay sleepless on his twig-and-blanket bed, staring up at the tent pole blindly. A fire was in him to possess that dusky daughter of the pharaohs, but he fought it, knowing that once her own mind was decided, she would be a succubus out of his lonely dreams.

Groaning, he rolled from side to side. Jothab, should I be grateful to you for giving me this chance to know my own wife better? Or angry because your treachery is keeping me from her body? It was a riddle fit to send to Hiram of Tyre, but only one man in all the world could answer it.

Solomon was that man, but he did not know the answer.

Toward a red, cold dawn, he slept.

For a week Solomon guided his army through the gorges and the wastes of Zin. He doubled back on his tracks, searching for the dust cloud that would herald the coming of his chariots from Megiddo. Often he would go to stand on the rim of the sands that stretched away toward Sheba.

Always, it seemed, he waited.

And then one midday, under the broiling sun of this wilderness, a trumpet sounded, faintly and far away. The dust cloud showed itself then, tinted golden when the sunlight filtered through.

"The chariots!" he roared, and went to meet them.

In the stables of Megiddo, there were five thousand war carts and fifty thousand horses. Less than five hundred of them found Solomon.

"We came in full force," said a kneeling captain. "We hunted you from Jerusalem to Edom. Then it was decided that we should split our forces into ten units. Praise to Yahweh that I found you first!"

To lighten his discouragement, Solomon learned that a thousand archers marched behind the Megiddo chariots. They were big hillmen from Moreh and Gerizem, wearing sheepskin *kaunakes* and metal bracelets on their arms, used to sighting their arrows at running jackals and wild goats. His heart leaped in his chest at sight of them.

Less than two hours after the arrival of the chariots, a rider leaped from a foam-flecked horse to land before his king. His naked arm lifted and pointed to the west.

"The caravan of Eli ben-Sholoth, Highness! I have sighted it, and spoken with the camel drivers!"

"Benajah!" roared Solomon, unable to sit any longer on the ebony stool, with the panther skin thrown over it, that was a symbol of his majesty. "Benajah, take a dozen riders and my seal ring to Eli ben-Sholoth. If Midas has made the bows and the quivers and the arrows I ordered, old Eli will have them. If he does, bring them to me!"

The camp caught fire from the fervor of their king. Men whistled and joked, and now there was no hoarding of food, for Solomon sent word up and down the ranks that each man was to eat his fill, and drink wine with his water. The days of running were over. Now it was time to bring the attack to Omri of Gaza.

Nathan counseled prudence as he leaned on his staff

before the royal tent. "Omri has three to five times the number of your warriors. Wait until the other chariots arrive! Be safe rather than sorry!"

Solomon paused in his pacing to swing around. Laughter was on his lips. "Such advice from Nathan? Have you no confidence in Yahweh?"

Nathan flushed and scowled. "Confidence in the Lord is a fine thing, but—"

"Ah, now! No buts! I'm tired of playing hare to Omri's hound. I want to go fight him, face to face, as two kings should fight, in all their strength!"

"You will not have all your strength," Nathan reminded him.

"When those bows arrive, I will be stronger than any other ruler in all the world, even to the lands from which the first maker of those bows fled! Watch your king, Nathan, and bid Anohbet watch with you!"

There were no words that could shake Solomon. He was a man apart, a man possessed of a bright confidence and an unalterable will. His voice roared out above the campfire talk and the ring of mailed shirts where the sentries stirred against the heat.

The bows came in the first cool of the evening, with the camels swaying and their little copper bells making music in the wind. The tied bales were set high on the pack saddles. With his own knife, Solomon cut the rawhide thongs that bound them, scattering half a dozen bows and quivers of polished black leather and sandalwood, ornamented with copper friezework and set with bronze at their bottoms, across the ground.

In a hand he held one of those curved horn-and-wood bows high over his head. Now his voice trumpeted and men came running, to stand and stare.

"You men of Moreh, hear me! Listen, you Gerizem hillmen! How far can the strongest man among you shoot an arrow?"

A voice called an answer that made Solomon laugh. "Watch! Watch as your king, who is no trained bowman, puts you to shame!"

The camp fell silent, for no man argues with a king, even such a mad king as Solomon seemed to be for the moment. Solemn men saw him bend the bow and string it, then lift a yard-long arrow from a case. He set it to the bowstring and drew the gut far back. To his ear he held the feathered arrow tip, while the heavy bow bent in a deep curve in his hands.

He let the string and the arrow go.

Up and up that sliver of wood and metal arched into the sky, leaping like a powerful stallion to the touch of the whip. It climbed and climbed at a gentle angle, quivering as if alive. As far as the keenest eyes could see it rode through the gathering darkness, always climbing.

A roar of sound lifted around Solomon. Men shouted and ran, and for once in his life, Solomon was glad that they did not remember he was their king. In their eagerness, the archers of northern Israel almost shoved him aside; in their haste to hold one of those horn-and-wood bows themselves, they forgot him.

They slashed bale thongs with their bronze daggers. Reverently they lifted out the bows. Zealously their keen eyes scanned their curving lengths. The black lacquered bow cases came next, and the foreign arrow shafts.

The captain of the archers, a slim youth of the tribe of Ephriam, bent his knee to Solomon. "Lord King, what must we do to earn such weapons? Truly, the jinn themselves must have fashioned them!"

Solomon grinned his pleasure and gestured expansively. "They are yours. Each man of you will take one, and a bow case with its arrows. Guard them with your lives, and their secret as well."

The men shouted, but the young captain still knelt. Now he raised his face and there was a look of exaltation

on it. "With such bows you could conquer the world, Lord King!"

A spasm touched Solomon's face. Can you hear that, Sheba? he asked from a forgotten corner of his mind. Making his lips smile, he caught the captain by a shoulder and shook him gently.

"Conquer only Omri, Captain! Defeat Omri and Jothab and the Philistines who march with them!"

One bow and quiver Solomon took himself, to hang in his tent beside the long iron sword and his Grecian helmet. Anohbet came while his fingers were still caressing the enamelwork of the black-and-gilt bow case, moving almost silently on sandaled feet. At sight of her his eyes widened.

No longer did she wear the black Egyptian wig. Her own hair hung down to her shoulders in a thick black wave, and dark bangs were curled above her low, wide forehead. She looked more natural this way. The ornate wig hair always made her seem a lovely but curiously lifeless doll.

"I have been letting my hair grow, Solomon," she said softly, looking at him proudly. "Secretly, and hiding it all the time under my wigs." She giggled a little, then froze as if afraid of her own mirth. "I did it to convince you I mean what I say when I ask Yahweh to give you victory."

Gently he touched her hair, stroking it, loving its perfumed weight in his fingers. His heart wrenched inside his chest, for he knew that she was abrogating an Egyptian custom of centuries. She was making him a peace offering, a symbolic olive branch with which to bind her promise.

"Laugh again like that, Anohbet," he whispered.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Then she flushed and stammered, and to her own surprise, her giggle came again, making her seem a little girl.

A little vexed, she scolded herself. "It is not right for a queen to make such noises!"

"Even when they sound sweeter to her king than all

the music of Egypt and Israel? When you giggle like that, you tell me you aren't the Anohbet I've always known, but a different girl—the girl who has come to me again and again in my dreams. That is the Anohbet I hold closest to my heart. When I see her come to life like this, can you wonder at my delight?"

"You have dreamed of me?"

"Many times." He smiled in answer to her wonderment.

A residue of hesitation and doubt still lay in Anohbet. Over and over again, she had tried to convince herself that Solomon loved her, as she loved him. Now she felt all those barriers crumbling, as they had begun to crumble those days before, when he had dined in her tent on his arrival from Sheba. As the dry earth falls away before the flooding waters of the Nile, so her defenses were going down.

Anohbet began to tremble. Her lips quivered and her long legs shook. Once she bowed her head, as if to find strength from closed eyes, but the weakness in her was too strong to be fought.

Furiously she hurled herself against Solomon, clinging to him with arms and stabbing fingernails. He was a beacon in the darkness of her days. With an honesty that frightened her, she saw him as a pillar on which she leaned, a man for a whom her body hungered, the very reason for her life.

"Solomon, Solomon! I've been a fool. A fool! I've loved you—I have! Even when I taunted you about your people, about your Temple, even about your God, I wept inside myself! I loved you, but my pride was so fierce and strong I could not recognize that fact. I hid behind my gods! With their names I mocked you!"

Hysteria was blossoming in her. Solomon listened to her words in amazement, knowing delight and an unparalleled joy. The smooth body that writhed so sweetly

against his own in her abasement was a perpetual caress.

"I am mad with love of you! Mad with love!" she whimpered.

His fingers twined themselves in her new-grown hair and held her head very steady as his lips caught her mouth. Straining her against him, holding her so motionless that only by the faint ripples that ran from her toes to her head could he know she was alive, he conquered her. His kisses made her go limp, so that she hung in the circle of his arms.

"Yahweh help me," she whispered. "Teach me to hold this man I love!"

Her lips were soft fires on his face, kissing and whispering disjointed phrases to his ears. Her hands stroked his shoulders steadily, as if she sought to reassure herself that he was strong and alive and safe in her arms.

"Forgive me, Solomon. Give me word that you understand. . . . Oh, my love, my very love! Come with me now to my tent . . . or here, upon the divan in your own. I must make you know how very much I love you."

A brazen trumpet blared somewhere in the camp, running like a cold wind between the tents, summoning men to battle. It froze the fevered blood in this man and woman, so that they stared at each other wild-eyed. As Anohbet slid away from Solomon, their bodies, where they had been pressed together so tightly, were cold with shock.

"It is time for you to go," she sobbed. "If you are killed, you will never know the love I bear for you! Stay with me. Let the others go. Benajah! He is your captain of captains! Let him lead your troops."

His palms cupped her cheeks as he smiled down at her.

"You talk with your heart rather than your head, my darling. What kind of king would I be to let another do my fighting?"

"You are right, as you always are. I am a fool!"

"Then it was a fool who appeared in my dreams. A

fool I came to love." He smiled faintly. "Remind me to tell you of those dreams sometime. If you were the fool, then I was your folly."

The trumpet blared again. Chariot wheels began to rattle as horses lunged on their traces. Shields clanged, and there was the sound of chinking plate mail where the spearmen marched. Harsh voices of the lesser officers shouted against the increasing confusion, bringing order and movement out of chaos.

"The tents will be coming down soon," he told her.

"You march by night?"

"What man can see us in the dark? By daylight we will come down on Omri and Jothab, and their spies will never know of our arrival."

She drew away and walked to the tent pole. Her hands lifted, to bring down the sword belt and the long iron sword in its plain metal scabbard. Coming back to him, she bent and buckled the leather strap around his middle. His cloak she threw over his shoulders, and she fastened the big bronze brooch that held it. Then she brought the Grecian helmet with its towering horsehair crest and put it in his hands.

"I have armed you, Solomon. Fight for me. For Yahweh, and for me!" Her hands rose to her neck, sliding upward to lift her wealth of black hair. Dark eyes gleamed slumbrously at him from under long black lashes. "Do not make me shave my head again, Solomon, my love. Win your victory. Defeat Omri and Jothab. Then come back to me."

The promise in her sultry eyes put a fire in him.

He did not dare catch her close to him again and kiss her. The will of King Solomon was a strong thing, but there were limits to what his flesh could withstand. He turned on a heel and went out the tent without a backward glance.

Anohbet smiled lazily, and began to dream of his re-

turn. After a while she would realize that her utter confidence in his victory was due to this new belief in Yahweh, and know surprise at the fact. But now her mind was too filled with visions of Solomon and how she could best welcome him home from the field of battle.

The chariots went first, drawn by three horses, their large wooden wheels rimmed in bronze. The drivers wore sleeveless coats of mail and cap helmets, and carried on their left arms large round bullhide shields. The archers who rode at their elbows carried no shields, for their arms must be free to bend the bows or to hurl the slim spears reposing now in the great sheaths that were strapped to the right sides of the chariots. Instead of shields, leather arm guards protected their right forearms. Large quivers held the arrows, and were set at opposite angles to the spear cases, so as to be nearer their string hands.

The horses themselves, being valuable animals, were protected from enemy shafts by padded blankets with strips of metal sewn onto them, close together. Headdresses of leather were fitted over their glossy necks, with holes for the ears and blinders on either side of the eyes. Chainmail aprons hung from their necks to their leg joints, and were tied at legs and withers.

Solomon rode with the chariots, a little to the fore.

In the dusty rear walked the foot soldiers, spearmen and swordsmen, and those archers who were not ordered into the chariots. Most of these were armored in bronze cuirasses and plain round helmets, with greaves on their legs from knees to ankles. Round bronze shields were slung at their shoulders. This was the heart of the army, the solid core from which a commander launched his spear charges.

Small carts and wagons trundled in the drag, drawn by small asses. Usually, when an army was on the march, the camp followers rode the baggage carts—harlots and

loose women who served the food and what wine was given to the fighting men, and danced and sang and lay with the soldiers during the night. There were no women with this army of Israel, except for Anohbet and her serving maids. Solomon wanted a quick-striking force, not an army that was marching for conquest and would be months in the field.

All the night they marched, for it grew cold in the Zin wilderness when the sun did not shine. There was no song and no whistling. Men walked quietly, meaningfully. Only a faint hum of conversation here and there broke the even rhythm of the tramping feet.

An hour before dawn they were on the plain of the Two Wells in the land of Negeb, and it was here that King Omri camped with his soldiers. Quietly they swung into battle formation, the spearmen in the fore, sitting on the cool ground and resting. Behind the spearmen were the chariots, drawn up in a thin, long line. On the far wings were the extra archers, their shafts thrust in the ground before them. Behind them were the carts and wagons, where cooks and sutlers prepared linen and crude medicines against the wounds of battle.

Solomon stood in his chariot—an ornate Egyptian thing with iron panels and ivory grips and a floor of mosaic woodwork—and let his eyes run up and down the line of fighting men. A flush reddened his cheeks; a flush of pride and power. It was good to be a king, to have strong men to hurl against his enemies. And yet there was more to kingship than this. A truly great king must concern himself with the welfare of his people, rather than his own greatness.

Perhaps a king became great because his first thought were of the men and women he ruled. It must have been this that Yahweh meant, when He chided him in the sandstorm.

"Give me this victory, Yahweh," he whispered, "and I

will be the kind of king You want me to be! I will do nothing without Your sanction. Give me victory, and Anohbet!"

Dawn glowed redly on the distant cone tents of the Philistines. It made a crimson glitter where it touched the chariots and the armor of the guards. A sigh rose from the throats of the waiting Israelites. The enemy stood before them more clearly with each passing moment. They could see the countless numbers of tents, and they guessed shrewdly at the numbers of men who slept in them. Dismay rippled through them, like a wind at their garments.

"They will be as chaff before the winnower," roared Solomon, sensing their fear. "Yahweh has promised me the victory. He sent us the great bows from Sheba. His hand is on your bowstrings, and your spears and swords!"

Heads turned toward him, and the white fright that he had seen in their cheeks turned now to flushed confidence.

"Yahweh! Yahweh and Solomon!" they roared.

Spears and swords lifted into the growing sunlight, shaking vigorously.

"Give us the command to charge, Solomon!"

"Order us forward!"

"Send us out to victory!"

Voices beat at him, but Solomon fought down the rising tumult in his chest that made it so difficult to breathe. There must be no haste in him this day. Instead of his emotions, his mind and his will must command the battle.

"We will wait," he said quietly, and the word went up and down the line.

Wait!

Wait for Omri to come out and fight!

There was no confusion among the Philistines. Keen eyes had scanned that battle array and carried word of its weakness to the King. Veteran captains stood with eyes shaded by their palms and studied the thin line of

chariots and the few spearmen and archers on their wings. Hard faces creased in sudden smiles. Dagon of Philistia was a greater god then Israel's Yahweh! Dagon had put a madness into Solomon, to make him appear here for the final decision with such a paltry weight of weapons! Philistine chariots outnumbered the enemy's three to one! Philistine spearmen and archers were ten to every man who stood by Solomon.

Omri laughed harshly when the news was brought to him. He was a brazen figure in his armor, and the red cloak that hung from his wide shoulders gave him the look of a conqueror.

Striding from his tent with his captains flocking behind him, he went himself to stare at the Israelites. Jothab was ahead of him, silent and preoccupied. Side by side, they viewed the enemy host that was so silent in the distance.

"Tonight you will be king of Israel!" shouted Omri.

Jothab said, "I will go and arm myself. I will fight in the forefront of the battle!"

"No," said Omri. "You will not fight. You are an important man. Nothing must happen to you."

"Solomon is there with his fighting men," Jothab protested hoarsely. "I should be fighting, too!"

Omri smiled crookedly. "Solomon is a madman. Dagon has stolen his wits. If Solomon dies, you are king. If you die, no matter what happens to Solomon, you will never rule at Jerusalem."

Omri did not say it, but the truth was this: If Jothab died, then Omri and Candia could never add Israel to the bull-god standards of Philistia. Another would be appointed in place of Solomon to be king of Israel; and no matter who that person was, Omri would have no tie with him, as Candia gave him a tie with Jothab.

Jothab did not know what emotion to feel, though he could not help the stab of relief that went through his

veins. He was no coward. He was willing to go out there into the heat of midday and the fighting, and take his chances on living or dying. But a man in a tent with Candia, safe from Solomon behind the Philistine warriors, had nothing to fear except the drunkenness that might come from too much wine or love.

Sullenly Jothab said, "I am not afraid to fight."

"It is not a question of personal bravery. It is a matter of common sense. What good are you to anyone dead? I have trained soldiers whom I pay well to risk their lives for me. Meaning no offense, they will fight better than you. Let them earn their keep, and do what they do best."

"The fight will not last long, at that," said Jothab, seeing the thin line of Israelite soldiers.

"By midafternoon you will be on your way to Jerusalem, a conqueror!" cried Omri. "Now forget this urge to be a war hero, and go find Candia."

Jothab turned away and walked slowly toward the purple tent where his wife awaited him. Angrily he told himself that he was a moral weakling. He should assert himself against Omri, and demand a place in the van. Still, it was so much easier to sit on cushions and be served chilled wine than to sweat in brazen armor and risk dying under a spear point.

Omri hid a smile in his beard. Jothab would make a good son-in-law. Already he had lost that sense of leadership which is so important to a strong king. Candia would rule Jothab, and Candia would do as her father ordered. Philistia and Israel united would make him a fine kingdom.

The rattle of a chariot roused him from his reveries. It was time to forget his dream and make it a reality.

When his charioteer reined in before him, Omri gripped the curving panel rim and stepped onto the rear lip. "Take me forward, that I may command my strategy!"

The spearmen would go first, with their shields raised

high. If Solomon moved his chariots against them, he would order his own war wagons forward from left and right, to catch the Israelite chariots between two irresistible forces. Should Solomon advance his own spearmen, they would go down before such a weight of men and weapons that the battle would be half over.

Either way, I win! he told himself triumphantly.

His only fear was that Solomon, when he saw the power of the Philistine army, would break and run for it.

A little wind came up as his spearmen swung by in ordered files, their mail coats clinking. As one, their spears lifted in salute. Then they were gone and silence lay over the camp, and all eyes watched the two thousand men walking steadily across the gravelly plain.

Solomon made no move. His chariots stood at rest behind his seated spearmen. Against his will, King Omri stirred and growled.

"Is he truly mad? What is he waiting for?"

The delay kept Omri off balance. He must know which way Solomon would move before he ordered more men forward. Would it be chariots or spearmen? Or the archers, who waited with unstrung bows for his call?

A whisper came into the wind, the whisper of a thousand arrows in the air. The front and second lines of Philistine spearmen were down on the ground, fully four hundred yards from the Israelite army. More arrows hurtled through the warming sunlight, and now half the corps of spears was on the ground.

"Dagon guard me!" whispered Omri.

As yet, there was no fear in him. From this distance he could not see how those long arrow shafts penetrated bull-hide shields and bronze coats, driven by the full power of the horn-and-wood bows. All he could see was the result: more than a thousand of his spearmen dead, and himself none the better for it. Omri only judged that the enemy bowmen shot with unusual speed and accuracy.

"Chariots!" he bawled, leaning on the panel rim. "Chariots, to the attack!"

They would smash that battle formation! His big war carts would crush those archers, grinding them into bloody flesh beneath their wheels. Philistine arrows would slay, as Hebraic arrows had slain. And when they were close enough, the slim spears would fly or be used to jab down at men as they reeled from the galloping horses. There was nothing like a charge of chariots to smash the ranks of an enemy!

"Take me forward with them," he told his driver.

Slowly the chariots picked up speed. The drivers leaned forward, both hands gripping the reins. The bullhide shields on their left arms were forgotten for the moment. They were a mile from the Israelites, so they concentrated on getting speed from the horses, so that when they hit the enemy they would come as a wedge of flying flesh and metal and stabbing, slashing weapons.

Half a mile they rode at a furious pace. The ground shook beneath them. Hubs squealed where stones rocked the chariots. Ahead of them, drivers and archers could see the Israelite bowmen fitting shafts to strings. The fools! Had they gone as mad as their king? What man could shoot a distance of five hundred yards?

The arrows flashed in the sun.

They came fast and straight, and the Philistine archers had time only for the frenzied thought that those were no ordinary bows before the arrow points were digging into throats and chests and eyes, and men were toppling from the chariots as toy soldiers toppled when hit by a child's ball. In pairs, they fell from the chariots.

Driverless, frightened chariot horses swerved from that bristling spear hedge before them. They added confusion and panic to the charioteers behind them who came driving into them at full tilt. Horses collided and went down, neighing shrilly in shock or screaming in pain as legs

snapped. Leather harnesses flailed and interlocked. Men went down under rolling wheels, shrieking.

Always, the arrows came.

Now the battlefield was a mass of broken chariots and lunging horses and dying men. The Israelite bowmen had time to pick their individual targets and make each arrow count. Behind them, men came running with extra quivers, strapping them onto the chariot panels close to their seeking hands.

King Omri was caught in the onslaught. With horrified eyes he saw those bows stripping him of his splendid army. He saw men and horses and chariots go smashing together in a melee of destruction. Here a chariot bounced and swung sideways without a driver, to sideswipe its neighbor and hurl the archer under the wheels of a third war cart. The driver tried to cling to the reins, but the horses were bolting from him. The broken chariot tilted and fell, tossing him clear. With the reins wrapped tightly about his wrists, he was dragged screaming to his death. A man gagged with an arrow through his neck, its bloody point protruding behind him. Three chariots met in a collision that hurled one of the drivers ten feet in the air. Three arrows made a pincushion of his body before he fell.

"There are no bows like that!" Omri screamed.

The bows were fact, and the arrows they fired were deadly truth.

His own archers could not shoot. Their arrows would fall far short of the enemy. There was no way to hit back, no way to kill as well as be killed. The Sheban bows broke the flower of Philistia during that long, hot noontime; broke and smashed it and left it bleeding in death on the gravelly Negeb plain.

"Get me out of here!" roared Omri.

There was no space to turn. Fallen chariots and frantically struggling horses and the bodies of dead men lay on every side. Sweating and cursing, his driver sawed on the

reins, seeking a path from this debacle. Then an arrow took him in the ribs and he grunted and slid backward.

King Omri knew that his scarlet cloak made him stand out in the confusion. He was reaching up to loosen and cast it from him when a shaft took him in the shoulder, pinning his cloak to him. The chariot rocked and slid. Off balance, unable to grab the rim grip with his numbed hand, King Omri of Philistia went falling backward.

He saw a lifted hoof coming down at his face.

Omri screamed and arched, trying to roll. Then the hoof was in his face, crushing it to pulp, and the chariot wheel that caught his leg whipped his dead body sideways. A fold of his cloak caught in the hub and the cloak tore. Half of that red mantle went whipping away on the wheel of the riderless chariot until the horses went down. The other half lay crumpled on the dead thing that had once been the King of Gaza.

Solomon was sick, but he could not avert his eyes from that slaughter. On both sides of him his archers were putting shafts to strings and whipping them out across the battlefield. They were cold and impersonal, these bowmen. They shot almost as if they were at target practice. They were used to death and to the sight of dying men.

Benajah came leaping onto his chariot just as Solomon was averting his face from the sight.

"We can take them now!" Benajah roared. "They're a helpless tangle. By flanking them and riding past, our bowmen can finish them off. Then the camp is ours!"

"More killing?" Solomon asked.

Benajah drew a deep breath. His hand came out to clamp on Solomon's wrist. "They'd have killed us. And more gleefully than we're killing them. I know how you feel, but this is no time to show mercy. That comes later, after the fighting."

"Give the order, then. I will follow."

The spearmen broke ranks, sliding behind the chariots as their horses, frantic with eagerness, tugged hard at the harness poles. Slowly the war carts rolled forward, flanking the field to left and right. As they went past the smashed chariots, they poured a concentrated fire of arrows on the survivors of the melee, dropping staggering men awed by the tragedy that had overcome them.

The cone tents loomed before them, their flaps blowing idly, empty to the wind. Now the men who rode in the chariots put away their bows and lifted out their stabbing spears, to finish off the survivors who fled in panic between the tents, dodging this way and that.

Following the chariots came the spearmen and the soldiers who carried swords or axes. On foot they went where the war carts could not go.

Then it was only a matter of killing.

Jothab and Candia were dragged from their tent and thrown into the dust before Solomon. They crouched there with their foreheads to the ground, trembling. For Jothab there could be a quick death by beheading or a spear thrust, or the slower and more agonizing death by torture. For Candia there would be death, or what was worse: Her body would be a gift of the King to the men who fought for him this day, and who had conquered.

Solomon stared down at them from the height of his chariot.

"I would spare you if I could," he said to Jothab, "but you have broken the law. You have turned your back on your king and on your people."

His hand waved and two spearmen came and led him away. They took him out beyond the tents and there they ran their spears into his chest and belly many times. His blood made a little pool in the dry ground.

Candia of Philistia was lifted to her feet by an axman and made to face Solomon. His face was white under the grime and sun bronze, and there was pity in his dark eyes.

"I can give you life or death. My quarrel is not so much with you as it was with your father and with Jothab. I do not know what to do. It would be a simple matter to have you slain, but I am weary of death."

The Philistine woman was pale beneath her paint and jewels. Her thin tunic was torn to her waist, and her feet were bare in the camp dirt. Except for the necklace of emeralds and the rings on her fingers, she looked like a camp follower after an orgiastic night. As the dark, sorrowing eyes of the King of Israel settled on her, she began to tremble.

Crying out, she went to her knees. "Do not slay me! Give me anything but death!"

Solomon searched the grinning faces of the soldiers who were crowding around them. Their armor was rimmed with dust and there was drying blood on their naked swords and axes. These men had fought for him this day. They had kept him safe and secure on his throne. Let them be the judges of this woman!

"Sentence her," he told them.

"Let her live, Lord King!"

"Aye! Life for the Philistine woman!"

"No death for her!"

A little surprised, he gestured at her. "Live, then. But what am I to do with you? Take you back to Jerusalem in chains behind my chariot?"

"Give her to us, Solomon!"

Their throats roared lustily as they surged closer around the chariot, hemming in the frightened Candia. Hairy hands pawed at her arms and shoulders. White teeth glittered savagely between bearded lips. Her startled eyes went from face to face, and then she knew her fate.

Candia tried to scream, but a big palm clamped over her mouth. Then she was lifted and swung high as eager hands reached for the jewels she wore. Then the jewels were gone, and her tunic with them, and she was carried

naked in the air through the camp, unable to move because of the strong fingers that held her at wrists and legs.

Solomon shuddered, thinking of Anohbet.

Wearily he descended from the chariot to walk to the purple tent that had been the royal quarters of King Omri. Lifting the flap, he stared at the rich furniture: the ebony footstools and low divan, the small dining tables and the heavy chests that held armor and weapons, silks and linens. There was an iron brazier over which food was cooked, and half a dozen round shields hung on a crosspole. All this belonged to him now, as the conqueror.

He went and stood above a chest, staring down at the flood of jewels that winked back at him from a silver coffer, red rubies and blue sapphires, pale diamonds and green emeralds. There were gold brooches and armbands of solid gold, and silver armor for ceremonial occasions.

Solomon slammed the chest lid down and sighed. These things meant nothing to him.

Now that the battle was over and won, he was aware only of a hollow emptiness.

"Was Hammurabi like this, after his victories? When Rameses crushed the Hittites, did he ask himself what was left?" he wondered.

The shouting of looting men came to his ears. Somewhere, the hubs of a chariot squealed. From far off, he heard a woman scream. Candia? Tonight around the campfires his men would celebrate their triumph. Big clay amphorae would be opened and red wine would run out into the helmets that would be stripped of their padding to make drinking cups. The riches of the Philistine camp would be gathered for distribution under the eyes of the officers, who got first pick.

He did not want to stay for that celebration.

Anohbet would be waiting for him.

The night was dark, with a faint coolness in the starshine.

Inside the skin tent, a fire glowed on a large round brazier. For the fiftieth time, Anohbet stared at her reflection in the silver mirror. A rider had come at sunset, flinging himself from a winded horse with word of the smashing victory over King Omri and Jothab. As she sat on the ebony bench outside her tent with Nathan standing beside her, she had listened to his words, and the blood had risen in her veins.

"Less than twenty men dead," Nathan said softly, smiling. "Truly, this is a victory that will make Solomon's name even more glorious than it is already."

Yahweh had sent the victory. Yahweh, the one true God!

A chariot came a little later, as they ate roast lamb and drank goat's milk from tiny silver cups. Laden on the chariot boards were three sizable chests filled with precious linens and matchless furs. Wondering, Anohbet pushed aside the platters of fruit that Tiy offered, to stare entranced.

"The Lord King sends this to you as his gift," the charioteer said, bowing. "He asks me to announce his coming within the second hour after moonrise."

Now she remembered all that, as she waited. From the captured chests she had chosen the thin Philistine tunic that was belted tightly at her middle with a girdle of golden chains A heavy necklace of rubies caught in silver wires lay on her bosom. Tiny anklets of golden bells were fitted to her bare feet. Musky perfumes were smeared into her loose black hair. The silver mirror told her that she seemed in truth the captured princess she wanted Solomon to think her.

Anohbet flushed Would he think her ridiculous, instead? Was she being childish or insane, in wanting to play out this symbolism?

And yet . . .

Solomon had won two victories today! His chariots and his horn bows crushed the Philistines. His spirit and his love and his God made her their victim. Solomon and his army were looting the Philistine camp. Should not Solomon also find her waiting, a captured thing, ready for his love?

Hoofbeats sounded on the shale of the plain beyond the tent. A dozen chariots came careening through the night, harness poles squeaking, wooden hubs groaning at the speed. Voices called out. Now Solomon was greeting Nathan, taking the old man affectionately in his arms, ordering prayers to be said and sacrifices made.

Anohbet rose to her feet and stood trembling.

Would Solomon laugh? Would he find only derision for her imagination?

Footfalls sounded. A hand caught the tent hanging and lifted it. Solomon was standing there before her, still in his armor, across which were dreadful red blotches. Dirt and grime lay on his face and on his cloak. Yet there was triumph in his eyes. To Anohbet, he looked the conqueror she had been imagining him all evening.

Motionless in the tent opening, Solomon paused, staring. His active mind told him Anohbet was clad in stolen Philistine finery for a purpose. She was too intelligent to don these things without a good reason. Always before she had worn Egyptian garments.

A familiar note about her attitude struck at him. Someone else today had stood like that, proud and fearful, waiting for some gesture or command that he might give her.

Candia!

Solomon laughed suddenly, feeling his body exult to his understanding.

"Come here!" he said, and watched her run to him.

Anohbet went to her knees, covering her face with her

hands. Her long black hair flooded over her, reaching to the floor, where it lay across his sandals.

"I smashed King Omri today," he said, looking down at her.

"You did more than that, Lord King. You smashed the gods of Egypt. You won yourself a queen."

Her head went back and now she looked full into his face, and there was a tiny smile on her lips. "I have a surprise for my lord king. Will he see it?"

"Another one?"

His hands lifted her to stand beside him. Gently he twisted his fingers in her hair and bent her head far back, exposing the smoothness of her soft brown throat. Bending, he kissed her there, feeling her pulsebeat.

"What is the surprise?" he whispered.

"In my tent, Lord King. In my tent. . . ."

Her hand clasped on his, she took him with her. When they were inside her tent, he looked around in surprise.

"I see no change. There is nothing new."

She walked from him to the little altar before the statued gods. One by one she took them down and broke them into pieces on the altar horns, and dropped them in the fire. Red flame came up around them, licking and eating at the polished wood and precious metals.

"The gods of Egypt are no gods," she said firmly. "They are only things made out of wood and stone, with no power in them at all!"

Abruptly she turned and stood facing him, and now she breathed more rapidly. Her hands she put behind her, clutching the curving horns of the votive altar, and it seemed that she was fastened there, as a captive might be. Her sultry eyes glowed hungrily at him. He saw all Egypt in the brown body that shone through her purple tunic, the coolness of the Nile on her greened eyelids, the heat of Thebes and Memphis in summer caught in the brightness of her eyes.

I am yours, her body told him.

With a harsh cry, born of the years when he waited for this moment all unknowing, he went toward her. His hands trembled as they lifted to her smooth shoulders and ran down her arms. Under his palms he felt the quiver of her flesh. Storm me! her eyes told him. Beat me down and take me in submission to your strength! As if to tempt that madness in him, she writhed aside, seeking escape.

A hand caught her long black hair. Another hand gripped the purple linen of her tunic and tore it down and away from her body.

"Solomon!"

Her cry was a victory paean of love.

Chapter Ten

JERUSALEM BECKONED to them from its perch on the Mount of Judea. Its high walls were yellowish stone crags above the valley of Hinnom and the valley of Cedron. In the olden times, when Abraham had come north from Ur and met Melkizadech the king, it was a small city called Salem; a mountain city, built on a limestone ridge, thrusting up from a series of rocky knolls and fertile hills. Since then, it had lost its independence and had been subject to Egyptian power. Under Akhenaten, it was lost to the Habiru, desert nomads ravaging in the sunset of the pharaohs.

One thousand years after Abraham sacrificed to Yahweh with Melkizadech, David came with slingers and mailed spearmen and found entrance to the city through the water shaft known as the Well of the Dragon. David destroyed the Jebusites, and made Jerusalem his own city.

On Mount Zion, David built his city and his palace, so that it flanked the old city called Salem, with the valley of Trypogon between them. Now indeed Jerusalem was a fortified stronghold, for tall walls rose up to join the walls of old Salem, and the gates were reinforced with stone pylons.

To Solomon, as he clung with a hand to a chariot rim, Jerusalem was a challenge. It housed the great Temple, and in another decade it would house his new palace as well. There, behind those sheer stone walls that rose upward to the sky itself, he would build magnificently, to make Jerusalem a name to be reckoned with forever. Where slender towers and rounded domes could be seen

behind the wall merlons, he would lift buildings that would be so lovely as to bring a lump to the throat.

All this he would do for Anohbet.

She swayed beside him now, in the circling arm that held her pressed against his hip for better support. The wind whipped her fragrant hair against his lips, and sometimes, when the chariot bounced a little on the rocky road, she put her head against his chest and embraced him.

From the plain of Negeb northward, past the cities of Arad and Beersheba, their chariot train assumed the proportions of a victory march. As more and more of the Megiddo army came to swell his ranks, Solomon set himself to play the part of conqueror. A born statesman, he knew the value of good tidings and the showmanship of success. His baggage vans came open to the sky, with the riches of Philistia displayed to staring throngs.

When men came from Hebron and from Debir, he caused the chests and coffers to be opened, revealing the Cretan artistry of the jewelry and the fine Tyrian dyework of the wools and linens. Silver votive armor was hung up on poles, and shields that were masterpieces of the goldsmith's art were set beside them. Men marveled at such plunder, and tales went up and down the central mountains of Israel and their interlocking valleys that Solomon was a king among kings, and a war lord whose like had never been seen before in Israel.

Anohbet was gracious and regal. When the city merchants and the hill shepherds saw her in her golden finery, they remembered the glory of Egypt and that Egypt was now an ally of Jerusalem, as was Tyre itself. It seemed, indeed, that Solomon could rule over every living thing, if he chose to do so.

Sometimes Nathan scolded him.

"Are you forgetting the Lord, Who gave you victory? Do you seek to take unto yourself His powers?"

Solomon only laughed and promised Nathan a celebra-

tion at the Temple the like of which he had never seen. To appease the old man, he went with him to the Cave of Machpelah, where Abraham and Sarah lay buried, and there they offered sacrifices on a tiny stone altar.

Now all that was behind him, and Jerusalem lay ahead.

The word had been spread in the market squares and in the gateway taverns. Men and women were lining the streets, and little children were scattering hyssop vines on the cobbles over which their chariot wheels trundled, until it seemed they traveled a thick green carpet right up to the great court of the Temple itself.

Solomon assisted Anohbet to the pavement.

For a moment, as they stood before the pillared portico, Solomon remembered the last temple he had been in: the temple of Astarte of the Fruitful Loins. Then Balkis had been beside him, taunting him into taking Ammasta, who was the wife of Kabesh, for the pleasure of her goddess.

Odd that he should remember Balkis now. Or was it so odd? They had been very close, as close as he and Anohbet were. Over oil lamps and ancient parchment maps they had planned a military and naval attack on all the world. Side by side, they promised each other that they would rule the earth.

He himself had forgotten that idea and put it from him, for Yahweh had so ordered. But Balkis would not forget. When she had news of his great victory, it would be a sign to her of the favor of Astarte. She would expect his couriers. And Solomon had no intention of sending riders down to Sheba.

Balkis of Sheba would consider herself a woman scorned.

Solomon shivered.

Sheba would act against him, he knew. But how?

"Nathan waits for us," said Anohbet softly, tugging at his hand, rousing him from his reverie.

The old man stood in the shadows of the portico above the pure-white marble steps. All around him towered the

Temple, of hewn stone and slender marble pillars. Toward these pillars Solomon escorted Anohbet, discovering a strange excitement in him, for this would be the first time that his Egyptian wife set foot in the Temple.

The portico was cool with shadow, and then the great bronze doors were opening and they were inside, on the cypress floor. Red cedar paneled the walls. A series of columns stood to left and right. Facing them was the Altar of Burnt Offerings. Beyond that was an open space known as the Court of the Priests. Between the altar and the sanctuary was an enormous brass bowl mounted on the backs of a dozen lifesize oxen. This was the famed Brazen Sea, which held the holy waters.

Solomon and Anohbet walked forward.

To meet them came the priests, in white robes and with fringed prayer shawls over their heads, wearing breastplates and ephods, embroidered coats and girdles, and the Urim and Thummim. Each of them carried a hand scroll, from which he chanted the sacred hymns. Now an acolyte brought forward a bleating lamb, and Zadok, the high priest, drew a ceremonial dagger and offered it to Solomon.

The lamb was lifted and stretched across the altar.

The dagger rose and fell, and the chanting grew so loud as to fill the chamber.

"For my victory, which I owe to Thee, Yahweh!" cried Solomon, and he lighted a fire beneath the dead animal.

Then he turned to Anohbet, smiling, and took her by the elbow.

"Come, my love. Examine the Temple with me."

Anohbet marveled at the Brazen Sea. "It is so large! And carved in the formation of an Egyptian lotus." Her hand reached out to touch the cold metal nose of a great bullock, one of the dozen that held the huge bowl aloft.

"Three bulls face the north, three the south, three the west, and three the east," Solomon explained. "They sym-

bolize the world. Over here is the golden table that holds the bread offerings, and beyond that are the gold candelabra."

Anohbet stared curiously at the olivewood doors that guarded the Holy of Holies. They were carved with palm trees and winged cherubim, and flanked by two hollow copper columns named Jachim and Boaz.

"Can we go in there?"

Solomon smiled. "That place is the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest can enter, and then only once each year."

"What is in there, to make it so sacred?"

"The Ark of the Covenant—an acacia-wood box plated with gold, four feet long and set with carrying poles. Above the Ark are the inner wings of two cherubim, winged figures that are twice the height of a very tall man. The room itself is lined with cedar and gold, and contains twenty large golden candle stands."

The Ark was the outward sign of the union between Yahweh and His people. Its acacia-wood core held the stone tablets of the ten commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Yahweh Himself had given Moses the directions for building it, revealing that a seven-branched candelabra must burn always before its mystery. A pot of manna would stand with it, and the rod that Aaron carried on his way from Egypt.

In the days of Moses, the Tabernacle had been a tent within a tent of black goats' hair, easily carried from one place to another, for the Israelites had been a tribe of wanderers since the days of Abraham. Now the Tabernacle was a thing of gold and cedar, stone and marble. And all around it was a temple that was the talk of the entire world.

Thoughtfully Anohbet looked around her, up at the high grilled windows and at the Lebanon cedars that made the walls a reddish wonder. Gold gleamed from

panels and slender columns, from table legs and candlesticks. It was serene and quiet here, and it bred a sanctity of spirit.

"It is a wondrous place," she said at last, "but I think it frightens me a little. Take me out of here, Solomon. Take me home."

They went out into the late-afternoon sunlight, hand in hand.

Now began for King Solomon the happiest and the busiest days of his life. From the tribes of Manasseh and Benjamin, Ephriam and Dan, Judah and Reuben, the elders came for counsel. They must discuss the new taxes that Solomon was rumored to be levying on his people, and go over the plans for his palace and its adjoining buildings, that they might take back to their villages the news of what the King was planning.

On long tables in his audience hall, he set up models of seagoing ships. These were Phoenician vessels, of curving wood strengthened by running ropes, for they would venture out into the great Inland Sea, and go south across the waters of the southern oceans toward the distant lands of Media and Persis, and even as far as India itself.

Solomon came down from his gold-and-ivory throne with its flanking lions to explain his dreams. His hands cradled a ship and showed how its greater strength enabled it to travel in waters unavailable to the reed boats of Egypt or the oar-ruddered barges of the Red Sea.

"Five thousand boats like this, filled with our wares and produce! Five thousand boats returning from Ephesus and Miletus, from the lands of Kush and Punt and India, filled with ivory and ebony, precious stones and metals."

When they asked him where he would dock these ships, he led them to a larger table on which a model city was laid out in colored clays. Blue clay showed the waters of the Red Sea and the harbor of the city of Ezion-Geber.

Red clays showed the city as it was at the moment, and white clays showed the improvements and new buildings his laborers and craftsmen would build.

"Wharves large enough to accommodate four ships at once! Buildings to store your goods until the time for shipping is at hand! Khans to house workers and camelmen and your own agents," he told them, making them see his dream by the sheer force of his personality. "There will be stalls for the moneylenders, and open shops for the foodsellers. Barracks for the soldiers needed to protect these investments. A small palace for the governor who will rule there in my name."

His finger pointed out each of these points of interest, and he smiled as he heard their gasps. Their faces were glum, for their canny minds knew the cost of changing over the face of an entire city.

"Will you squabble over copper bits when silver drachmas and gold talents are to pour into your coffers?" he asked them in surprise. "What kind of market have you now for your wares? You, Joseph ben-Addith! You have many men working to make fine cabinets and stools and tables. Will you be satisfied with a few local markets, when I can put the world before you? And you, Abram ben-Shechem. Your servants weave fine robes and garments, but can you sell all you make in Israel?"

They saw the wisdom of that argument, and when they went from Jerusalem to Mizpah or to Zorah, they took with them the memory of those words and repeated them again and again. Merchants made preparations for world trade. Businessmen added servants and slaves to handle new accounts.

Nor did Solomon forget the days when he rode alone and almost unguarded in the Wilderness of Zin, when his chariots from Megiddo failed to arrive. He set up a courier system, and went himself to that northern city that was to house his horses and his war carts.

For weeks Solomon threw his energies into a rebuilding of his armies and their quarters. At his word architects came and laid out sketches for a royal palace at Megiddo that would adjoin the new stone stables and chariot stalls.

Megiddo, which lay south of the plain of Jazreel, was the fortress city guarding all Israel from attack from the north. In olden times it had housed an Egyptian garrison. Most of its residents were Canaanites who had sworn allegiance to David after his victory over Philistia. They were loyal now to Solomon, but he had reinforced his barracks with husky shepherd men from Mount Tabor and the cities of Dothan and Samaria.

When construction began, Solomon went south to Jerusalem and devoted himself to that city. Already he had constructed the great wall between Ophel and the Temple, filling in the Millo trench so that the travelers from the lower city could find easy access to the higher Temple grounds. Now he busied himself in the erection of his palace and its separate wing for Anohbet. His audience hall and the House of the Cedars of Lebanon began to take shape.

Along the painted wall of his bedchamber stood the models of the buildings that were even now rising southward of the Temple. First there was the Palace, which would adjoin the Temple itself, with a roofed passageway to afford Solomon and his court private entry to the sacred grounds. The walls were of polished stone from the local quarries, and the roof was of red cedar cunningly fitted and decorated by carved beams trimmed with gold. Matching cedar panels went all around the interior of the Palace, in halls and bedchambers, and in the great audience hall, which was fitted with low benches and a high-backed ebony-and-ivory chair, where Solomon might hold informal councils. To one side of the Palace, forming a wing, was a group of buildings that belonged to Anohbet.

It was in this Egyptian section of the Palace that Solomon liked most to wander, and watch the red limestone columns rising as stone cube was fitted on stone cube, with each Hathoric capital surmounted by a naos. Underfoot were red and black tiles. The walls were of stone on which were painted scenes from the history and legendry of the land of the Nile. There was to be a round bedchamber as well, where he and Anohbet could withdraw from state affairs and be a man and a woman in love.

Beside the Palace and south of it stood the Court of Justice, where was housed the huge throne of gold and ivory, flanked by a dozen lions. On the curving wall that formed a backdrop for the throne, thirty shields of solid gold were hung, like blazing yellow eyes against the red cedarwood paneling. There was a second story to the Hall of Justice, which opened on a balcony surrounding the open Throne Room, where the law clerks worked, copying on long scrolls the records of the King's judgments and the laws. Smaller rooms held other courtrooms where the judges and the high priest might hear such cases as the King delegated to them.

Just beyond stood the House of the Forest of Lebanon. This would be an armory and a meeting place, for in its second story would be hidden the treasures of the kingdom, the jewels and golden ingots, the rare garments with gold and silver brocadework stitched onto them, and the art pieces that had been collected over the years. Sixty giant cedars had been hewn and shaped and fitted with solid blocks between the pillartops and the ceiling. Cedar ribs protruded from each of the cedar posts and were intertwined in such a manner that they seemed branches of the trees themselves. To the uninitiate, a first glance made it seem that he had stumbled on a cedar forest growing inside a building. On the walls Solomon had hung two hundred shields of solid gold.

These buildings were surrounded by a high stone wall in which were set tall pylons that held huge bronze gates. They were guarded day and night by picked soldiers. One gateway led down into the old city of Salem, while the South Gate brought a visitor out below Mount Zion.

To pay the expenses of such a building program, Solomon levied heavy taxes on the people, but these represented money that would be recovered from the increased trade that went by galleys from Ezion-Geber to the sea cities of Persis and India and by caravans to Egypt and Babylonia. Emptied money jars would fill again, and soon, under his planning. He paid his Phoenician artisans and architects with wheat and olive oil, as well as with silver coins. He ceded land to Hiram in return for red cedars from the Lebanon hills and for the gold and precious stones that would be used in his palace.

Solomon realized that he was driving himself day and night, but the mood for expiation was in him. The sins he had committed in Sheba were to be regretted, but he had gone into them with an illusion of world conquest for Yahweh before his eyes. They had been pardoned him by the Lord. Still, the aftermath of guilt that was in him sent him again and again to the Temple, to offer a burnt lamb and incense.

And always there was the worry.

Even while he walked between the columns of his audience hall, or ran a palm across the finely planed cedarwood that would go into the House of the Forest of Lebanon, the nagging anxiety was deep inside him. As he rode down the Valley of Cedron in a war chariot, or watched the maneuvers of his mailed archers and spearmen, or sat in judgment on the lion throne in the Palace of David, the anxiety was under his rib case.

When would he hear from Sheba?

And when Balkis of Sheba learned, as she must learn from the Israelite sailing vessels that stopped at her port

city for fresh water and barley bread and meats, that Solomon had abandoned any notion of overcoming the world, what would she do?

He was strong with peace, within Israel. His armies were powerful and well trained. Yearly he increased his war chariots and the powerful Egyptian horses that pulled them.

And yet if Balkis were to close the straits of Sheba to his galleys and so cut him off from this beginning trade with the southern world, was he strong enough to wage a war fifteen hundred miles from his own borders?

Day by day the shadow of Sheba grew over Solomon and the land of Israel.

Neither in the nights did Solomon permit himself freedom from the cares of kingship. Sometimes he summoned the priests and learned men to a small chamber off his audience hall. Here small shelves and niches were built into the wall, where hundreds of scrolls could be stored in tight ivory or ebony cylinders.

It was his fancy to select a cylinder at random and unfasten its end, withdrawing the parchment within and reading sections to the scribes and priests. When he was done, he would pause and look around, and ask them questions.

"Is there more to the story of Moses than appears here? When this sheepskin rots, will the story of Jacob die with it? And the sayings of our wise men, their proverbs that have been handed down by word of mouth for uncounted generations—are they to perish as do the bones of the men who made them?"

The priests and learned men stared at one another, a little frightened.

Solomon brought his fist down hard on the scroll table. "Do I talk in such riddles? I send riddles to Hiram of Tyre to baffle him, but I don't want to baffle you! What am I after? Why do I summon you here of nights? Be-

cause we of Israel have a duty to ourselves. Yahweh has appointed us His People. Shall we let His wisdom and the wisdom of our patriarchs die?"

Solomon gave orders that the verbal learning of the people be recorded for posterity on clay tablets and on sheepskin parchments. And to these laws and sacred lore he added, at the request of the scribes, the most popular of his proverbs.

"Record your own wisdom, Solomon! Let it live on after you!"

And because his wisdom was a gift from Yahweh, and so could be considered as the Word of God, he also added his own sayings to the list of Israelitic literature that was being compiled.

It was about this time, too, that Solomon began his *Song of Songs.*

The poem was conceived on a night some weeks after Solomon and Anohbet returned from the Wilderness of Zin. It was summer, and the hyacinths and anemones were heavy with blossoms in the gardens. A sultry wind was moving across the land, bringing languor to the body and a sultry heaviness to the spirit, stirring a lassitude in the man and woman who sat so close on a marble bench beneath a blossoming cinnamon tree, with the sweet fragrance of low myrrh bushes all around them in the air.

All this day Solomon had worked with his hands, helping to fashion a golden stele that would be inset in the cedar panelings of his audience hall. His muscles were fatigued, and his mind was weary. The feel of Anohbet under his arm was a good thing, making his heart tender and full of love.

With a finger he stirred the locks of her thick black hair so that he could look down at her profile. A faint smile quivered on her rich lips as he bent and put his mouth to her cheek.

"My husband said he was tired," she reminded him, shifting so that her hip pressed tighter to his leg.

"Your cheeks are softer than the wings of doves," he replied. "You are a very lovely woman, Anohbet, with lips like scarlet flowers, and breath as sweet to the taste as honey."

Anohbet turned to stare at him in some surprise. What she read in his glowing eyes made the breath catch in her throat. "You are strange tonight, Solomon!"

"Say my name again, like that!"

"Solomon." She smiled. "Solomon, whose very name is like the gurgle of oil poured from jars! Perhaps there is magic in your name, as gossip says, after all. Is there?"

With a gentle hand he disarranged her thin tunic, opening it to her golden girdle. "I have tasted the red wines of Crete and Thessaly, and the yellow wine of Eschol, but your breasts are sweeter than all of them. And your perfumes are richer than balm of Gilead or myrrh from Arabia."

Anohbet was breathing faster. The warm night was discovering a sultriness in her own smooth flesh to match its heat. "I am a garden to my lord. I am pressed grapes and flowering myrrh!"

"A garden enclosed is my wife." He smiled, and touched her throat with his mouth. He whispered, "Her love is stronger than fine wine. Her lips are dripping with honey."

Anohbet turned in his arms and slid down until her head rested on his thigh. Her eyes were closed, but he could see the blued lids tremble and the lashes flutter on her cheeks.

"I am brown of skin, almost black, Solomon, my love. How can I compare with the daughters of Jerusalem?"

Deep in his chest he rumbled laughter. "Anohbet, Anohbet! You are spikenard on the altars of the temple, and balsam in the cupped hands of the slave girls!"

"Love me with words, my heart! You are so strange, so

different. I don't know you, and yet I like this side of you, even though it does frighten me a little."

"I never wooed you, Anohbet. You said yourself that ours was only a state marriage, and that there was no love between a king and his queen."

"Then I did not know what love can be. Teach me, Solomon! Woo me!"

Above her closed lids, his voice was a whisper in the night. His hand soothed her black hair, and trembled as he wound it around his fingers. Later Solomon would put down on parchment the words he poured into her ears this night under the towering branches of the cinnamon tree, and those words would live forever in the *Song of Songs.*

Yet now he had no thought but for this dusky woman who lay on the bench with her head pillowed across his legs. Even as his voice whispered of the love he held for this Egyptian woman, his hands were beseeching her body. Lazily she stirred, writhing, sobbing softly through smiling lips.

"I am a fountain in your garden, Solomon!"

"A well of living waters, a spring shut up. Fragrant with musk and myrrh and all the spices of Arabia."

He bent and kissed her gently, feeling the fury of her hunger opening to him with her lips, and milk and honey lay under her tongue.

"Let my beloved come to his garden," she murmured against his mouth. "Let him eat of the fruits and the vines, for I am the flower of the fields and the lily in the valleys."

"Anohbet, you have stolen my senses, ravished my heart!"

"I am your beloved, as you are mine!"

Easily he lifted her in his arms, carrying her across the garden walk and into the silent, sleeping palace. She was warm and soft, and heavy with lassitude, but there

was a strength in him that came from the love he bore this woman, so that she seemed less than one shekel in weight. For all the years of his life, he had lived for this moment. Since Anohbet had come from Egypt, this night had been in his dreams.

"It will never end, not even with the dawn coming up over the Mount of Olives! For the memory will be always with us, and the magic of the moment."

"We have so much time to make up! All the wasted years!"

The shadows of her chamber were dark and fragrant as he put her sandaled feet to the floor. A round divan, scarcely a foot off the floor tiles, and thickly covered with quilted cushions and thin linens, was surrounded on its far side by a row of ebony and ivory cosmetic tables covered with jars and perfume vials.

"If only we could turn back time! Go back to that day when I first saw you. If things could have been then the way they are now!"

"Why not?" she murmured.

Giggling like a village maiden, she twisted from his arms and ran, crying over a shoulder, "The same clothes I wore then I keep now, in a sandalwood chest. Let me put them on, Solomon. Wait for me in the audience hall, as you waited for me that very first time."

Never had he seen Anohbet like this, with her dark eyes shy and her dusky cheeks flooded with red flushes. She was indeed a virgin in his eyes. With fists clenched tightly, he fought down the fevers in him. This night he must indulge her, give her the reins of their love to hold.

"I will wait. But –do not tarry overlong!"

Even as he turned his back and moved between the archway draperies, she was stripping off the gown of Phoenician weave, unbuckling the golden belt at her middle, kicking her tiny feet free of their sandals. Beneath her ribs, her heart was slamming wildly, just as it

slammed those years ago when she walked down the palace hall with a hand on the arm of Shematshep, who was Siamon's ambassador to Israel.

"The gold collar, and the armbands," she cried, lifting the cover of the sandalwood chest and hunting frantically. "I wore those, and—here! This gown of Theban linen! Gold and white leather sandals! And this girdle of gold squares set with rubies!"

Frantically she dressed in the pale moonlight that poured through the slitted windows. The fear that had been in her, that this moment of disrobing might chill the heat of her blood, was vanished. If anything, her loins were even more molten, her heartbeat quickened and was more pronounced.

"Yahweh! Yahweh!" she whispered, clasping the golden belt at her middle. "Turn back time for both of us this night!"

It seemed that her prayer was answered, for panic came and sat beneath her jeweled pectoral so that she began to tremble. Her palms came up to her cheeks and found them fevered. "I am afraid," she murmured in delight. "As a virgin bride is afraid of her husband, I am afraid of Solomon!"

Laughing softly, she ran out to the throne room.

Solomon half rose from the gold-and-ivory throne when he saw her moving toward him among the shadows. With the white mist of the byssus revealing her slim legs and torso, she was a living mirage from the green waters of the Nile. Her long black hair was covered with a thick black wig from which depended lotus blossoms of gold leaf.

As she had done so long ago, she curtsied gracefully. When she rose, Solomon was descending the steps from the lion throne, reaching for her hand, turning her and smiling down into her face.

"You are lovelier than the miniatures Shematshep

showed me," he told her. "I never dreamed that a woman could be so fair."

"I am glad I am pleasing to my lord."

Solomon smiled, but there was deviltry in his eyes. "I have always admired the craftsmanship of Egypt. Her temples and her pyramids, the quality of her linenwork and jewelwork I have considered the finest ever produced. I see that Egypt also boasts the ability to produce lovely women."

"As Israel produces flatterers?"

He laughed, and walked with his arm behind her down the length of the great hall. This way they had walked long ago, but then Anohbet had been cold and formal, nothing like the tempting woman who paced beside him now; whose brilliant eyes promised every fleshly pleasure that a man might imagine.

Suddenly she cried out and lifted her hands to the heavy golden collar at her bosom. It was sliding down, carrying the byssus tunic with it, its catch undone.

"Solomon!"

He laughed delightedly, watching her efforts to clasp it behind her throat. "A fascinating clasp. It opens very easily!"

She had to laugh herself. "Would you have treated me this way, back then? Before all the guests that were here to help us celebrate?"

"The thought was in my mind," he admitted with a grin. "I wondered what you'd look like with half your garment gone. It was an intriguing thought."

Anohbet eyed him challengingly, feeling the deviltry rise in her veins to match the light that shone from his eyes. Languidly she unfastened the golden collar and dropped it at her feet. Slipping her arms from her tunic, she pushed it down to her waist.

"Now walk with me, my husband," she said sweetly, and laughed to see the hunger in his gaze.

"Anohbet, Anohbet!"

"Walk, Solomon! Now it is my turn to tease!"

Slowly she made him pace the length of the great hall and back again, until she could hold him no longer with the richness of her breasts. His arms whirled her, dragged her in against him so that she could scarcely breathe.

"This is how I've always dreamed of you! Like this! Shy and wanton. Sweet, yet imperious. Proud but very tender."

They kissed beneath the shadow of a pillar, and there was an overwhelming hunger in them that transcended the fact that they were a king and a queen. In this instant of their madness, they were only a man and a woman destined from the start to love one another, to know the mutual pound of heart to heart and the stirring symphony of throbbing blood, each for the other. They tried to whisper of this between kisses, but the night was slipping swiftly toward the dawn, and they had all those years of coldness to forget. . . .

Much later, when Anohbet stirred beside him on the round divan of her bedchamber, Solomon roused from sleep to catch and hold her tight against him.

"If only we could keep this past night always with us, my love," she whispered.

"And we shall," he promised.

Anohbet looked at him questioningly.

"I shall write it down, put it into words. It will be a love song that men will never forget."

Flushing, she whispered, "You cannot!"

"I shall speak in allegorical phrases. Only you and I will know the true meaning of the poem."

Anohbet sat up and began to braid her hair. "Then let me help! It shall become a play between us. You will write a part, and I another. Then we'll interweave them so that no one will know who wrote what."

That night they began it, seated together by the light

of a dozen oil lamps, laughing and kissing, and turning from the sheepskin parchment to know again the wonder of this love that was between them.

From this time on, Anohbet became a queen in truth. It was as if the womanhood in her needed awakening; and that, once roused, it could blossom forth as did flower petals in the warm rays of the sun. She sat with Solomon on his gold-and-ivory throne, with the diadem of Israel shining in her black hair and with the golden scepter of her queenship in a copper hand, and her voice joined his in the judgment and in the council chambers. It was her hand that wrote messages to her father, the pharaoh Siamon, directing that he open the coffers of Egypt for Israelite silver. Caravans were formed in Memphis and in Thebes, laden with fine linens and ornate carvings, with enamelwork and jewelry, that the people and the houses of Israel might grow richer and more renowned in the eyes of all the world.

When the city of Gezer rebelled against its Israelite rulers, it was Anohbet who took the field in helmet and golden cuirass. Gezer had been a gift of Siamon to Anohbet at the time of her marriage. To help his daughter, Siamon sent phalanx after phalanx of Egyptian veterans clad in mail corselets and bronze helmets, with archers in quilted hauberks, and half a thousand chariots. With them he sent siege engines and supply carts.

This was more than a game to Anohbet. Once before she had been with her husband during battle, only then she had remained behind in the tents while he went alone to do the fighting. Now she stood beside him in the royal chariot, listening as he gave his commands, watching the orderly files of archers moving forward under the shelter of the big standing shields to send clouds of shafts over the high walls and into the streets of Gezer.

A Canaanite city, Gezer was one of the many that still

worshiped the pagan gods on the high hills around it. Unlike the other conquered cities of Israel, it did only lip service to Solomon while going about a normal way of life. The broken remnants of Omri's army had taken refuge here. Some of his captains went about the city market places, fomenting revolt. The tax collectors that Solomon sent were impaled on wooden poles and thrust above the walls. Gezer closed its gates, massacred those members of the tribe of Dan unfortunate enough to live inside its walls, and declared its independence.

Inasmuch as Solomon was deep in planning and building a system of courier roads throughout his kingdom, the defection of Gezer was of great importance. Through Gezer ran the roads to Megiddo and Beersheba.

And so Siamon, to please his daughter, gave her an army of her own, that she might stand beside her husband and restore this city that was her wedding gift to his rule. Anohbet welcomed the chance to play at general. She was like a schoolgirl with a new doll.

Ignoring Solomon's orders, she stood among the siege engines, watching the iron-headed rams smash into the stone walls, disregarding the arrows that came whistling through the air. True, Solomon had stationed two shieldmen always at her side, an Egyptian and an Israelite, but sometimes they could not keep pace with the sudden movements of their queen. Once an arrow hit her cuirass and broke. Another time, a hurled spear just missed her flowing hair by inches.

"I am your queen!" she told Solomon proudly in their battle tent, head held high as Tiy stripped her of her armor. "It is my place to stand beside you when you risk your life to strengthen the kingdom I help you rule."

She lifted a slim brown leg so that her greaves might be unstrapped and put aside. "Not only am I your queen, but I am also the woman who loves you. If you take risks, I want to take them with you."

The quilted hauberk that protected her soft skin from the chafing armor was lifted off, and now Anohbet wore only a transparent chiton, sleeveless, that just reached her upper thighs. She threw back her head, running slim fingers through her long black hair. A smudge of dirt ran from her chin high up to her temple, where she had been splashed by a catapult that had rolled through a puddle on its way to the wall.

Solomon stared at her, his eyes kindling. He could see right through that thin stuff, and what he saw of her body made him breathe more deeply. Anohbet walked to a little table that held her ointments.

Tiy heard Solomon gasp as Anohbet bent over. Smothering a smile, she moved on tiptoe from the sandalwood chest across the tent. Her hands loosened the flaps as she slipped outside. There she retied the thongs, and warned the impassive guard to let none enter.

When a hand at her chiton lowered it from a shoulder, Anohbet gasped, feeling Solomon's lips touch her flesh. He whispered, "My little battle maiden! My war goddess!"

"Solomon! No—please! I am sweaty and stained with dirt! I—"

"It is how I want you! Like this, fresh from the fields!"

His mouth drove her into a frenzy, making her arch spasmodically against him. His voice went on: "You've been sweetheart and wife, temptress and confidante to me. Now you shall be my fellow soldier, my battlemate!"

As her senses reeled to his powerful fingers, Anohbet felt her knees go limp. Then she was being lowered to the hard dirt floor—like any camp follower, she thought wildly, welcoming his savagery with a vein of hidden yearning—and her quivering lips breathed a prayer of gratitude to Yahweh for teaching her the truth about Him, and for giving her this soldier-king to be her lover.

The next day they made a breach in the south wall, and with Solomon and Anohbet riding in their midst in their

royal chariot, the Israelite and Egyptian spearmen swarmed through it, spreading out into the streets. After the spearmen came the chariots, thundering two by two through the broken wall, which was being widened by men with picks and spades. The chariots carried archers whose bows brought down the soldiers from rooftops and house windows.

Within four hours the fighting was over.

The leaders of the revolt were beheaded in the market square, together with the elders of the city. Then Solomon gave Gezer a new government, left a troop of soldiers to keep order, and rode east to Jerusalem.

Nerkal the Assyrian thrust his knife deeper in the big slab of goat's-milk cheese. His hunger was a bite in his middle, for his camels had come far today from Nebaloth into Sheba. As his white teeth tore at a crust of barley bread, which he alternated with cheese, he looked around him at the Inn of the Fertile Goddess.

It was pretty much the same as it had been—how long ago was it? Almost three years or more now, since he'd put Ogoth onto Solomon and Benajah. By the lips of Astarte! That had been a fight! He himself bore a scar across his shoulder where the tip of Solomon's blade had dug. Well, he bore no malice. Jothab was dead with King Omri, and bygones could be bygones for all of him.

His glance roved the inn, scanning merchants in striped cloaks and tunics, watching a half-naked sailor off one of the ships to Punt with an arm around a tavern girl, talking with her. Beyond them two dusty riders from Ophir were washing the road dust from their throats with wine before setting out again. A seller of amulets, with his wares in a basket under his bench, sat wolfing mutton stew. Nothing out of the ordinary tonight.

As he lifted the beaker of wine to his lips, his attention was caught by a flash of metal in the doorway. Three

soldiers clanked into the big room. After them came a scribe, a perfumed dandy who carried a scroll in his hand.

One of the soldiers brought out his short sword and banged on a nearby table with it. "Attention to the scribe! News from the Palace!"

Clearing his throat, the scribe unrolled the parchment. "By order of Her Highness, Balkis, Queen of Saba and its surrounding countries: a proclamation. Rewards will be paid to those travelers now in our lands who will bring the Queen word of what transpires in Israel. Again, listen! To those who bring news she deems worthy of especial note, a large reward!"

Nerkal brooded at his winecup, not hearing the soldiers and the scribe go out to complete their rounds of the public houses.

News from Israel? Well, he had news of a sort. Solomon and Anohbet were like turtledoves in their love for one another. Buildings were growing like lentil plants in Jerusalem and Megiddo, Ezion-Geber and Samaria. Daily the roads heard the trundle of Egyptian war chariots moving north to the Megiddo fortress. The war carts passed caravans heading south into the land of Midian, with wares that would be packed aboard fleet galleys for distant cities.

Gold and silver were pouring into the royal coffers, as well as into the clay money pots of the merchants. A boom of prosperity was in Israel, all across the land. He himself shared a little of those good times. His rich Assyrian garments, fringed and thickly hung with embroidery, sold as amulets on a holy day.

Was this the news that Sheba wanted?

Or was there some other thing she sought, with her royal eyes and ears: some sign, perhaps, that Solomon had not forgotten her? It might be a good idea to visit the palace of Balkis, if he could decide what she wanted most to hear.

A tiny flicker of resentment still lived in Nerkal. Jothab

had been his friend, and Jothab had died at Solomon's order. He supposed it was none of his concern, this feud between brothers. Still, he had liked Jothab. If he could avenge his death in some way, there would be a sweet taste in his mouth.

What news did Balkis seek?

The bath water was warm, and the scents of musk and spikenard were in the air, lifting from the marble burners that flanked the archway to her natatorium, but Balkis pouted sullenly. As she swam lazily back and forth, she told herself that this moodiness of hers was affecting the entire kingdom. From the slave girls who waited for her with towels and rubbing oils in their hands to the counselors whose gray heads shook worriedly over her tantrums, all Saba was waiting.

She knew what they wanted.

Her laughter was bitter. The Queen must take a husband, a man to share her throne. This was the law of life, the law of the land, so that heirs might come to sit on the throne and the long line of their rulers might not die out. She had plenty of choices, of course.

There was swarthy Esarhaddon, the hill prince from inland Karkar, rich in horses and camels, as a prospect. He was a fighting man, more interested in chariots and battle-axes than in women. At least, he would be faithful. And Narmoled, the youngest son of Nabu-mukin-apli, who was king in Babylon. Narmoled had been a visitor in Saba this past winter. Marriage to him might be a pleasant change for a while, until one of them grew bored. A perfumed youth, handsome as an Egyptian statue, he was almost as wise in the ways of love as Solomon had been.

The breath hissed in her throat.

Solomon!

That was the name she fought to forget. Angrily she threshed in the scented water, slapping her palms down

hard on its surface. If he was to disappear from her life so soon, why had he ever come into it? His words had been clever, well chosen: offering her the world for a chance to bed with her. And she, like a foolish virgin, had allowed herself to be taken in! That was what hurt the most, she admitted honestly. Her vanity was bruised.

And yet Solomon had not lied when he spoke those words. Ambition had been a flame in him, lighting his eyes and powering his lips. He had meant what he said. Since then, something had happened.

Reflectively Balkis ascended the steps of the pool toward the open towels that awaited her wet flesh. When he rode from Sheba, from my very arms, it was with a promise never to forget me! she reminded herself. He whispered the words in my hair, as we held each other for the last time!

No, whatever it was that had changed his mind had occurred after he left Saba.

But what?

The towels were gone now and the smooth palms of the slave girls replaced them with fragrant oils. Her fists were clenched at her sides in the intensity of her thought. Perhaps she was silly to imagine these things. Perhaps he was only cementing the strength of his own nation before coming to her with his treaties and his plans for naval and military union.

Solomon could have sent word to her, though. A fast courier could cover the distance from Jerusalem to Saba in two weeks. Soon it would be three years since she had had news from him. Three years of brooding loneliness, of petulance and despair. The momentary brightness his visit had brought into her life was now a dead thing.

Balkis let the slave girls dress her in thin linens and golden bracelets, with red leather sandals for her feet and a thin tiara for her black hair, which was sprinkled lavishly with gold dust.

She sighed. Another day at court was ahead of her. She

would have to listen to interminable quarrels between businessmen and merchants and ship captains, between soldiers and caravan *mukowams.* Astarte! For once, let something different happen! Let a rider from the north be there with a royal cylinder from Solomon, with word that he still loved her and that he would be coming soon in his strength and power to give her the world!

Smiling bitterly, Balkis moved like a lovely automaton from the natatorium along the corridors of her palace toward the audience hall. A file of spearmen stood like statues on either side, eyes straight ahead, their helmets and shields burnished like gold, their greaves and mail shirts polished brightly. She walked between them regally and proudly, as a queen should walk. But there was no spirit in her.

As she sank onto the throne, acknowledging the murmured greetings of her counselors and Kabesh with a weary smile, she let her eyes assess the crowd. No, there was no dusty rider among the merchants and the nobles.

Balkis sighed, and extended a hand.

"The first order of business, Shaphat."

The old graybeard handed her a scroll. "A dispute between Makkal the maker of mud bricks and Yussuf the jewel seller, over a new warehouse Yussuf is said to have ordered and never paid for."

Shaphat hesitated, then leaned forward. In a whisper he added, "There is an Assyrian trader newly out of Israel, Highness. Once he was a friend of Jothab, the brother of King Solomon. He heard your proclamation, and is here to claim a reward."

Balkis straightened. Excitement pounded in her veins. With her eyes she thanked Shaphat. She said softly, "We will hold audience with him later, in the chamber off the funerary chapel. See to it, Shaphat, while we deal with these disputants."

There was new life in Balkis. Her courtiers sensed it, and

the contestants for her justice were soon made aware of it. As if Solomon with his wisdom were at her elbow, she questioned and judged, after weighing all the facts. There were many who left her audience hall this day disgruntled and angry, but there was none who did not see the honesty behind her decisions.

Today the queen allowed no delay. Her crisp voice went out across the hall, summoning the litigants before her. Her fingers were avid for the scrolls on which the cases were recorded. Even Shaphat stood bemused by her attitude, until a little smile came to his lips and his head bowed to hide it as he whispered a prayer to Baal that Solomon might come soon again to Saba.

When the hall was cleared at last, Balkis rose and, beckoning her prime minister, bade him lead the way to the little room off the chapel.

Nerkal was standing by a table on which was set an inlaid gaming board, idly moving the draughts pieces, when Balkis entered. He swung around, gripping an ivory pawn, and knelt. His lowered eyes watched her slippered feet move past him toward a low wall couch.

With a wave of the hand, she dismissed Shaphat. "Assyrian, you come from Israel? How recently? Stand when you speak."

"Within the last moon, Highness. I am a caravan trader from Haran. It is my business to know much of what goes on behind palace walls."

"Even ours?"

Balkis smiled faintly and Nerkal nodded. "Even yours, Highness. That is why I am here now."

"What have you learned about affairs in our own country?"

Nerkal drew a deep breath. "All Sheba knows how its queen grieves for Solomon. Her sorrow is reflected in their lives. Men grumble over caravan robberies, over high taxes, over the trade that bypasses the cities of Sheba for

Ezion-Geber and the towns of Israel. Men seem to think that a queen is like a goddess. At one word, she can cause these troubles to fall from their shoulders."

Balkis frowned. "Men are fools!"

"There are other irritations. The priests have been predicting dire events. The warehouses are crammed with stuffs that have no market. There has been a rebellion in the army garrisons stationed at Ophir."

"You learn a lot in the taverns," Balkis said sharply, with bitterness on her tongue.

Nerkal shrugged. "I speak the truth, knowing Your Highness wants nothing else. As I learned of affairs in Sheba, so I learned of things in Israel."

Ah, she catches fire at that, Nerkal thought, biting his lip to prevent a smile. She strains like a stallion to the chariot traces! Regal she is, in that Egyptian gauze and golden collar, and proud, with her eyes bright under the bluing of her lids. And human, too. See how her fingers clench and unclench!

"And Solomon?" she whispered. "You have word of Solomon?"

"I can tell Your Highness many things about the king of Jerusalem. My only concern is," and he looked at her sharply with his black eyes, "whether to speak truth or tell you things you want to hear."

Balkis sighed, and stared at her hennaed toes. "I want the truth, Assyrian. A person who hides from the truth is like an ostrich with its head in the sand."

With his legs spraddled wide before her, Nerkal began to speak of the building of the great fleet and the wharves and docks at Ezion-Geber, of the rising of the Palace walls and the pillars in the House of the Forest of Lebanon, and of the military might of Israel, which grew with the passing of every hour.

"Chariots," she whispered. "Twenty thousand of them, you say?"

"And forty thousand horses or more to draw them. Archers and spearmen by the thousands, too. Slingers from the hills, and huge swordsmen from Nubia and Ethiopia. I think Solomon got a scare when Jothab joined with Omri of Gaza."

Or perhaps he has not forgotten our dream, Balkis thought hopefully.

The caravan trader began to walk the room. "His love for his Egyptian wife is a byword from Dan into Beersheba. They are seen everywhere together. He puts more and more power in her hands all the time."

Balkis hissed like a striking snake, coming to her feet. "His love for Anohbet? What is this you tell me?"

Nerkal shriveled before those glowing eyes, cursing the stupidity that had brought him into these thick stone walls. Trapped he was, with the vengeance of a scorned woman to be wreaked on his flesh. More than once he had heard tales of the torture dungeons of Sheba.

"I only speak what you asked! Great Sheba, I meant no offense!"

"He promised me the world! An alliance of Israel, Sheba, and Tyre!"

The Assyrian caught his breath. This was the secret between Balkis and Solomon, then. He had wondered what it was that had held them together. Solomon was a man, but the pleasures of the flesh alone would not take him so far from his throne and keep him away, week after week. The more he thought of the notion, the better it sounded to him. Israel, Sheba, Tyre!

"Between the three, who else is there?" he whispered to himself.

Balkis heard, and whirled. "He said the same words. Now he has run away!"

The Assyrian was a shrewd trader. His glib tongue was a byword all across the fertile crescent and down into Arabia. With his eyes opened at last to the problem that

gnawed in this woman, he could understand its solution.

"In Assyria, we have a saying: When more than a day and a night separate a man and a woman, the rival strikes. Anohbet is with Solomon. By remaining in Sheba, Your Highness, you give her time to knot the bonds that bind Solomon to her body."

"Would you have me go like a lovesick schoolgirl to moon outside his window? Am I a gutter harlot to scream out the pleasures of my flesh?"

Nerkal spread his hands. "Forget the love between you for the moment. Concentrate instead on this dream that Solomon seems to have forgotten."

Balkis frowned. "Now, what will you mean by that?"

Nerkal turned to the window to hide the triumph in his dark eyes. With crafty words he was swaying her, as a fisherman sways the fish within his casting net. As his eyes roved the terra-cotta drains that carried rain water from the roof into the earthenware basins that he could glimpse on the far side of the terrace beyond the window, his heart began to pound.

An idea was forming in his mind. If he were clever, Nerkal the Assyrian might still become something more than wealthy. Should this union between Israel and Sheba and Tyre become a fact, and Assyria were conquered and held in thrall, surely a grateful Balkis would appoint him its governor!

"Many years ago, before I left the household of my father," he began, "there was a maidservant who sought to lure me to her cot. With honeyed words and tidbits stolen from the table, she wooed me. I was a stupid thing then, with no experience of women. One night she came into my room and let her garments fall to the floor, and turned around until she made certain that I saw her from every angle. Then she dressed and went back into her own room."

"And?"

"I followed her, as a bull follows the man who clasps the bronze ring in its nose."

Balkis chewed her lower lip, frankly studying the man. He meant to convey some thought by this episode from his past, but she only shook her head, puzzled. "You speak in riddles!"

Nerkal swung from the window, aware of the excitement building in him. "What Mirzeh did is no more than I do myself, every day. She had something she knew I wanted, so she let me see enough of it to rouse my cupidity. As I show my striped brocades and fringed shawls from Assyria to my buyers, explaining their weave and texture, so she showed her body. I was unable to resist. Neither are my buyers!"

Balkis laughed bitterly. "What has this to do with Solomon?"

"Solomon built a dream in you, and in himself. Now he has forgotten the sweetness of the dream. Arouse it again in him! Taunt him with it! Make him want it as he wants nothing else in life!"

"Ah! Now, how would I go about showing Solomon the whole world?"

"By showing him parts of all of it! By forming a great caravan—the longest and the largest ever made—that included apes from Africa and tin from Iberia, perhaps a yellow man, if such can be found, from the fabled lands beyond Bactria. Add a strangely wrought weapon from India, and a living elephant."

"A caravan," she whispered. "A great caravan from Saba! From the whole world!"

Balkis trembled to the inner explosion of delight that blossomed in her. Astarte of the Nubile Breasts! Mother of War! Why could she not have thought of such a thing herself? Hurriedly she undid a great golden armlet set with blood rubies.

"Take this gift, Nerkal, and my gratitude. This is what

I have been waiting to hear. A mighty caravan to tempt Solomon from his petty little land, and show him the wonders of what he might have!"

The Assyrian smiled as he bowed over the bauble she pressed into his palms. "If I might be of further service? As an experienced trader, I could help select the artifacts and animals, the men and women that should make up such a royal train."

Balkis laughed softly. "Ah, and when Solomon succumbs to the dream he conjured up, you will want a further reward? Well, why not? A royal governorship? A petty kingship over a conquered country? Egypt? Assyria? Babylonia? Yes! All that, and perhaps even more, Nerkal! I can be generous with the world when I own it. Very generous!"

The Assyrian bowed low. "Then I have leave to go about the business? To hire camels and horses and men?"

"Return here by sunset. There will be a royal decree waiting for you. Shaphat and Kabesh will work hand in hand with you in this. I want nothing to be omitted. What there is in the world we will take to Solomon and spread it out at his feet. As your little maidservant spread her clothes!"

Nerkal chuckled. "If Solomon is the man I think him, his ambition will rise to the lure."

Then he was gone, silently, with only a swish of his fringed robe to mark his going. Balkis was left alone. A dreaming smile was on her red mouth as she moved to the recessed stone window and stared out at the terrace flaggings.

She rested her chin on a palm. Her languid eyes saw only the illusion of Solomon coming over the stucco wall of her gardens like a hawk, standing before her with his long iron sword still bloody. And later, when he came striding up the ceremonial aisle of her dining chamber with Benajah at his side, with the Egyptian ambassadors fall-

Chapter Eleven

THE WORD went on before them.

It fled through the oasis country of Tema and Dumah and past the wastes of Shur and Zin into southern Israel and the lands of Reuben and Judah. Fast riders on lathered horses raced between the mud-brick buildings of the tiny villages, crying out the news. Horsemen flung themselves from leather saddles before the roadside khans, alerting all within its sun-baked walls.

Royal Sheba comes!

Men drinking deep of cool red wine from leather jacks, or hurling painted dice squares, paused to listen for the faint tinkle of the camel bells. Children stared southward for the first sight of the rising dust cloud that would herald the caravan's approach. Over evening meals men and women talked of nothing else.

All the world was going north to Israel.

There were wonders from the unknown lands of Africa below Meroe, marvels from Ind and the countries beyond its borders. Huge animals with tails both fore and aft, fleet racing camels from Nubia, monstrously hairy men captured in the jungles: these and more were to be seen along the wayside.

The caravan was the largest ever put together. It stretched for miles and miles, and the rumble of its war chariots and wagon hubs made thunder seem the whisper of a child. Untold riches sparkled in the sunlight: the rich black ebony of its litters, the goldwork on the chariots, the sheen of bronze shields and silvered helmets, the brilliance of jewels set into costumes and sewn onto the brocaded blankets that covered the camels.

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The people of the village stood awed as the iron cages went past. Children shouted when a great snow leopard screamed its anger, and when a giant gorilla beat its thick chest with hairy fists. Women shuddered as a tawny tiger paced its wheeled cage, snarling hate. Men drew back as shuffling elephants from far India paced with swinging trunks.

Nor was this all.

Mailed men walked in rhythmic stride, the splendor of their armor unable to hide the power of their bodies. Their spears were as many as the trees in the forests of Lebanon. Nubians in lionskins paced slowly, clutching studded clubs. Egyptian mercenaries followed in striped headdresses and carrying their heavy curved falchions. There were Assyrian archers in fringed shawls and Babylonian spearmen wearing kilts and horned helmets. From India, the rulers of the coastal cities had sent phalanx after phalanx of warriors clad in mailed shirts, bearing their famed longbows, with strange turbans on their heads.

So many wonders, and each villager with only two eyes to see it all!

Small carts were filled with chests and coffers, some large and some small, and even the shepherds out of the hills knew that these held treasures too splendid for the common folk to see. There were fabulous jewels and art pieces of exquisite workmanship in ivory and ebony, alabaster and lapis lazuli, formed into shapes that caught the breath in the throat. Strange gods from strange lands, carved in sandalwood or molded out of silver, went by on long-handled litters, their priests in coned hats or turbans stalking slowly beside them, waving sweet incense from golden thuribles.

Up from Sheba came the world.

A megaron from Crete was there, a room fashioned complete in every detail, to tiled floors and columns, with dolphin wall paintings done in red and blue and silver,

and benches for the women set beside the washing bowls. Men from Knossos in short kilts and carrying the double-edged ax that was the symbol of their island land marched before slim youths who leaped and tumbled before huge bulls that were held by golden chains.

Tin miners from Iberia walked with their tools in their hands, a cart following after them with slabs of the precious metal, which, when mixed with molten copper, formed the hard bronze that was used for shields and mail shirts. There were even dwarfish men in the skins of beasts, with their skin painted blue, and the whisper ran ahead of them that they were from islands lying to the northwest of the earth. They held stag-horn spears, and crude stone axes were thrust into their belts. Some of them carried small cages in which were caged red grouse—birds to be found only in their island world.

Tall bull-horn standards lifted into the sky, carried by squat dark men on shaggy ponies, wearing lacquered leather quivers with short horn bows thrust into their bow cases. These were nomads out of the vast, unknown lands beyond Media and Persis, who lived in skin tents and drank mares' milk.

From India, below the cloudy mountains that separated the world of the nomad herdsmen from their own, walked dark-skinned hunters in whose veins flowed the blood of mixed Aryan and Dravidian tribesmen. More than a thousand years ago, these people had built great civilizations at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro and had traded with Sumer and Ur before the time of Abraham.

These Indians carried shields painted in the form of the horned dragon. Curiously curving swords swung from scabbard chains at their hips. Behind them were the vans holding the statued forms of their gods: Indra of the rain and lightning, Varuna of the moon; Mitra, the god of the sun. Wedged between these deities were libation bowls of steatite and silver, and pottery that bore the art forms

of the Indus. Models of tiered temples were carried on litter poles. High overhead floated feathered umbrellas that were used in court functions to protect their rulers from the sun.

Wonder piled on wonder, and men found it hard to breathe as they stared. The legend of this caravan would go down in tribal story, to be told and retold again and again over lonely campfires and mud-brick hearths for more than a thousand years.

The wealth and the wonder of Sheba was advancing to meet the wisdom and the glory of King Solomon. No mortal hands could have gathered such wealth from all the corners of the world! Truly the jinn that served Solomon and helped him build so many buildings were on loan to Balkis of Sheba! The camel bells tinkled on and on, and dust rose from the ground in a steady cloud that would not settle for days after the marching men and beasts had gone.

Soon, now! thought Solomon.

Soon he would see this woman of Sheba who had been a witch and a temptress to him when he had been a guest in her palace. Solomon stared southward from the ramparts of the Palace of David, as once he had stared into the gardens those years before. Then he had seen Rhynthos the Cretan fleeing before Benajah, with the queer bow in his hand. It was because of Rhynthos that all this had begun.

He wondered where the Cretan had gone. For a year and a half he had served Solomon well. Then he had sold his house and freed his slaves, and gone away on a Phoenician galley. The threads of one lifetime crossing and intermingling with his own, and then going on into forgetfulness.

And the threads of Balkis' life?

Solomon had thought them raveled from his memory,

plucked from the fabric of his life as an errant thread is plucked from the loom.

The messenger who had appeared in his audience hall weeks before, with news that Queen Balkis was coming north to Israel, had dispelled that illusion harshly enough. He still remembered the stunned shock in which he had sat and heard those words. Anohbet had been beside him, and Anohbet had been afraid.

When the witch woman of the southlands comes to Jerusalem, what will happen to our love? her eyes asked.

"Nothing will happen," he assured her. "I love you and you alone. So forget this Balkis. There is nothing to worry about."

Yet he was worried.

"Royal Sheba comes to Jerusalem, King Solomon!" cried the dusty courier. "She comes with gifts and many wonders, to pay friendly homage to a fellow ruler."

Homage!

More likely, hate and homicide. Or would Balkis stoop to murder in venting on him her fury at rejection? Did he start at shadows, like an unruly colt being broken to the harness?

Solomon paced the rooftop wall, and there was no sleep in him.

Neither was there any sleep in Anohbet.

These past three years had been the happiest in all her life. Like the queen she was in name, she had taken her place as queen in fact beside her husband. With the lore of Egypt she helped the wisdom of Solomon, making his name and the name of his city a glory among men. At his side she worshiped Yahweh. At his side she made the judgments. When his chariot rattled out of the Horse Gate on one of his periodic tours of inspection, Anohbet stood braced within his arm.

It was not only as a queen that Anohbet gloried in these days. She took her place beside her husband as his ardent

wife, discovering a hidden vein of sensuality inside herself that only Solomon could bring to life. As a queen she ruled her people; as a woman she loved her man.

Now a threat to her queenship and her womanhood was coming north to challenge her.

Balkis came first, riding in a massive ivory chariot whose wheels and panels were rimmed with red gold. Through the Horse Gate she came into the narrow streets of Jerusalem, to ride between the mud-brick and stone walls of its buildings toward the Mount of Zion and the city of King David. From the flat rooftops and from the stone wells, from shop-front stalls and the stone steps of neighboring houses, the people watched.

Murmurs of awe went with her, for the onlookers from the higher places could look out over the Mount of Olives, past Absalom's Tomb, and see the winding length of the great caravan that came with her to Israel. These called down to the people below of the great wagons and iron cages, the animals and the marching soldiers and the chariots. Nothing like this had ever before been seen in their world, not from the cataracts of Egypt to the distant lands of the Scythians.

Solomon and Anohbet waited on the steps of the Palace, flanked by Zadok and the lesser priests of the Temple, with Benajah and a picked file of guards to their left. For this day, the bronze gates had been taken down so that the way lay open to the high market place. Arrangements had been made to house certain favorites of the train in the Palace, and some in the houses of the wealthier merchants. The vast majority of their visitors would march down the Gate of the Strong Stair and live in a tent village set up for them on the slopes of Mount Eroge, all the way to Gihon.

Anohbet pressed closer to Solomon, for now she could see the royal chariot and the woman who had loved her

husband. Beneath the golden collar her heart seemed to still and die. When Solomon saw Balkis again, would he turn away from her? What manner of woman was this queen whose loveliness was a byword even in Israel? Anohbet stirred against her fear, and bit down hard on her tongue.

Black hair flowing loose, caught only in golden wires above a tunic of white-and-purple Egyptian weave; slant eyes and a mouth like a red fruit; Tyrian cloak flung back over her shoulders so that her tight gold girdle could disclose the shapeliness of her hips and the slim wonder of her legs as she came striding forward: this was Balkis of Sheba. A royal ruler, and a lovely woman, beautiful and proud, smiling and confident.

"Solomon! I bring you greetings from Saba! Greetings and royal gifts, as befit an event that will make history!"

Solomon was gracious. He could read the mockery that lay in her dark eyes, and the tiny light of pride. Her attitude chided and forgave him, all at the same time. The fingers that clasped his outstretched hands reminded him of the love that had been between them, even as her lips smiled their disapproval of his indifference.

To Anohbet, Balkis was polite but distant. It was as if only Solomon existed for her in Jerusalem. The rest were mere toys and puppets, like the little stage effects set up by the traveling mimes and players when they came into a village. It was Solomon on whose forearm she rested her fingertips as he turned to enter the Palace, Anohbet to whom she gave her back, so that the Egyptian woman was forced to follow a pace behind them. Yet when Solomon waited so that Anohbet might walk elbow to elbow with them, she only smiled and nodded.

"Caravan traders tell me Israel grows wealthy," she said, as they entered the long audience hall.

"We have been fortunate."

"From the temple of Astarte I have seen your galleys moving past the wharves of Saba bound for distant lands."

Her voice reminded him of how they had worshiped the goddess together, within the temple and its gardens. She added, "Ammasta sends her wishes for your prosperity. And Kabesh, too."

Soft laughter trailed from Balkis. "Do you still send riddles to your friend Hiram of Tyre? I have a riddle or two myself for you to propound in your wisdom, Solomon. First let me ask: What kind of love never dies?"

Solomon smiled faintly. "The love of a man for a woman does die, as does the love of a woman for a man. So it is with mother love, the love of a man for his God, the love of son for father and father for son. Hatred, enmity, jealousy, quarrels, and bitterness can ruin such devotion."

They were close to the throne now. Slightly below the throne of Solomon and to his right, a smaller throne had been set up, between the flanking stone lions, a mate to the ebony-and-ivory chair of state where Anohbet sat.

Balkis lifted her thin brows. "Then all love dies?"

"One type of love can never die, by its very nature," Solomon laughed. "Because everything that a man or woman does is based on it. It is self-love, the love for one's own self, that governs all our actions."

Balkis clapped her hands together. "A good beginning. Later I will give you other riddles."

For now, there was to be the presentation of gifts. Before sitting, Balkis clapped her hands again. The file of slaves and courtiers who had followed her into the audience hall and were ranged at her right stirred as her commands rang out.

Two draped figures walked slowly between the file of attendant Sheban soldiers, down the length of the audience hall, and came to a stop before the three thrones. Thin veils covered them, so that all that could be seen was the occasional flash of a slippered foot.

Balkis cried out and a slave lifted off the veil of the smaller figure.

Solomon leaned forward. A yellow woman stood before him, her black hair coiffed in a high cone, her small body wrapped in a thin silken robe decorated with embroidered butterflies and plum blossoms. Her slant eyes were enigmatic, and her head was bowed. Beneath the wide sleeves of her robe, her hands were clasped on her wrists.

"The yellow people live on the far eastern shores of the great land lying beyond Media and Persis," said Balkis, watching the interest that Solomon betrayed by the manner in which he sat on the edge of his throne. "Her name in her own tongue is Yu Shui, which I am told means the springtime rains. I give her to you as a slave, Solomon."

Again Balkis clapped her hands, and now the second figure was being stripped of the shrouding veils.

Eyes that had never seen a yellow man or woman before could scarcely turn away from one wonder to behold a second. What new marvel was Balkis of Sheba to unveil before their gaze? A living legend—for the Chin people, who were only a folk tale to the men and women of Jerusalem during the reign of King Solomon, had already materialized before them. What else was left?

Solomon stood, staring.

A red man faced him, a man with black hair and black eyes, arched nose and receding chin. He was short but stocky, with wide shoulders. It was the color of his skin that amazed Solomon most.

"Red! A red man!" he said softly, coming down the six steps of his throne dais to walk around the man. "In my youth I traveled to Tyre, and there spoke with Phoenician sailors and with the learned men of their temples. Five centuries ago, one of their sailing ships was blown far off its course, straight westward from the Pillars of Herakles. For weeks the ship traveled, until it reached a great land where lived men like this—men with red skins.

"For hundreds of years the Phoenicians have been telling that story. Everyone laughs it off, because the whole world knows that west of Iberia the waters flow forever over the rim of the world. Now—"

He looked at Anohbet. She too was staring. Her own body was a coppery red, but there was a subtle difference in the coloring and in the formation of the head and body. It was almost as if the red man were a very distant cousin of the Egyptians.

"The priests of Egypt have always claimed that there is a land far to the west. Sometimes flowering branches and the bodies of men with skins such as this have been found on floating pieces of driftwood. Always I thought this just part of the old legend."

Balkis was standing, too. Her eyes held triumph and exaltation. "The world is a very strange and wonderful place, Solomon. The man who rules it would have time and power to explore it. To find such marvels as these, and other wonders, he could commission great fleets!

"And these are not all the strange things I have brought from Saba. There are other sights to be seen, later on."

Solomon was aware that a struggle was beginning inside him. His old dream of world conquest was alive and flaming in him. A red man! A yellow woman! Who knew what other wonders might be awaiting discovery by his ships or his soldiers? He walked back and forth before his throne, and every eye was on him.

His thoughts were rioting inside him, driving a heady exhilaration along his veins. Now that his eyes had seen a yellow woman and a red man, there might be other wonders to be seen, here at his court. Perhaps the centaur or the chimera—that monster that was part lion, part goat, and part serpent—still lived. It might be that one of his vessels, if he owned the world, would bring home a griffin, a beast with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. Did the basilisk, whose breath was

deadly to human beings, or the manticore, the lion with the head of a man, whose mouth held two triple rows of shark's teeth, really exist? If he owned the world, he could learn the answer to such questions! And the unicorn, with its elephant feet and horned head—was there really such a beast?

Balkis watched with her eyes shining in hope and with her lips half parted. He saw her little clenched fists, and the trembling of her limbs. Just as it did in her, such ambition had blazed high in him, long ago.

Solomon sighed. With every fiber of his being he wanted to rule the world.

Anohbet stirred faintly, smiling as if she guessed the inner struggle that tormented him. Her dark eyes were serene but understanding.

Suddenly Solomon was calm. Yahweh, his God, had forbidden such ambition. Yahweh had given him Anohbet to love, and he would rather have this dusky Egyptian beauty than all the rest of the world.

He said slowly, "We will feast tonight. After the feasting, we will talk again."

Anohbet went with Balkis to the chambers that had been put at her disposal. There was a calmness and newformed confidence in Anohbet that she could not hide. Her eyes had looked deep inside Solomon when he glanced at her. What she had read there was more pleasing to her than precious jewels.

Balkis watched the dusky woman with a faint curl to her mouth. If this was her opposition for the love of Solomon, he was as good as in her arms! She was beautiful, the Egyptian, but beauty alone was not enough to win a man like Solomon. A woman must give him something else, something of her spirit, of her hopes and wants and ambitions. She had this and to spare. Anohbet was cold and aristocratic, with nothing but love with which to snare her man.

"When Solomon rules the world, you will be a very happy woman," she said slyly to Anohbet as they paused in the stone archway leading into the guest chambers.

"I am a happy woman now." Anohbet smiled. "That is the difference between us."

Balkis frowned faintly. She did not like the gentle mirth that glowed in the eyes of the Egyptian woman, or the light of sudden contentment. She hesitated, then said coldly, "The swine in his mudhole is happy, too."

Anohbet laughed. "The swine knows no better, Balkis. You and I do. Now, sleep well!"

And she was gone, walking with a faint swing to her hips that revealed their roundness to the staring Balkis. Perhaps she had misjudged this Egyptian. There were depths to her that she had not discovered on a casual glance. Had Solomon plumbed those depths? It was a disturbing thought, and it annoyed Balkis so much that she ordered her hairdresser whipped for a fancied clumsiness.

The feasting in Jerusalem was on a less pretentious scale than it had been in Sheba. A group of musicians, whose fingers brought soft melodies from flutes and flageolets, dulcimers and harps, sat in a nearby alcove. Silent slaves passed between the low eating couches, bringing sliced lamb on large silver platters, and roast Theban pheasants and heath cocks, together with sturgeons cooked in leeks. Only in the variety and spiciness of his meats and fish and pastries did Solomon match Balkis, for he was a worldly man and employed Phoenician and Egyptian cooks and bakers in the Palace kitchens They gave his feasts a cosmopolitan air that had been lacking in David's time.

Rich yellow Taneotic, that most expensive of all wines, flowed almost like the cheaper Coptic that was being passed around the outer courtyards among the soldiers and camelmen of Sheba. Plates of duck wings dipped in yellow honey

rested beside trays of fish livers and pheasant brains. There were heavily spiced wild boars from Lydia, roasted whole on a spit.

A great table in the shape of a U was set with goblets and platters of beaten silver. On these plates, with two-pronged forks and with sharp iron knives, the men and women of the company ate course after course of sauced meats and candied fruits. Forgotten was the normal frugality of the Hebrew meal. It seemed that Solomon wanted to prove to the queen and courtiers of Sheba that the men and women of Israel knew how to live, too.

Tumblers entertained, lithe men from the steppelands of Scythia. There were dancing women from Crete and from Nabataea, and sword jugglers from Perseopolis. Only when these were done did Balkis clap her hands and give orders in a low voice to the bearded Nerkal.

Then with a soft laugh she turned to Solomon.

"It is now my turn to entertain. I will unveil the wonders of the world that I have gathered together to do you honor."

There were three high-backed chairs at the dais table. At Solomon's left sat Balkis in the place of honor, while Anohbet was to his right. Sheba leaned closer as her antimony-fevered eyes mocked his solemnity.

In a whisper, so that none but he and she might hear, she said, "All this you could have, if you wanted it. Look on it, Solomon, and imagine that everything I show you belongs to you!"

She was trying to make the dream come back into his heart, Solomon knew. With pomp and riches she sought to tempt him from his contentment. Slowly he shook his head. "These things I have put away, Balkis. I look on them as a youth looks back on his early indiscretions. With age comes wisdom. With time, true wisdom has come to me."

Balkis only laughed and pointed.

First came golden carts carrying large models of far cities. The stepped tiers of an Indian temple, bright and gilded, were ranged beside the white alabaster city of Knossos, with its bull temples and its Minos palace. The lion gate of Mycenae in far-off Greece, from which Agamemnon had marched years before to Troy beside Achilles and Ulysses, was to the left of the great gardens of Babylon. An Egyptian temple—the many-pillared temple dedicated by Hatshepsut to the sun god, Amon-Ra, to Hathor, and to Anubis—had been wrought in white alabaster and lapis lazuli. Ur was here, with its flat-topped roofs and its temple of Nin-Gal. Nineveh vied with Susa in the strangeness of its temple landings. There was a Phoenician shipyard, with a galley half built in the ways, and a stretch of burned-brick rampart leading to the blue harbor waters.

Anohbet cried out at the sight of the miniature low-terraced temple of Hatshepsut, and went to finger its tiny columns and stone ramps longingly. Solomon walked with her between the carts, aware that Balkis watched his every move with a sly smile.

Then the golden carts were pulled aside, and slaves came forward, bearing sandalwood coffers on litter poles. These they rested on the tiles of the floor, and an old man, a stargazer from the temple of Baal in Sheba, came to fling back their lids and expose what lay inside them.

One chest held rare perfumes of Ophir and Arabia in golden phials: saffron and nard, genugreek and amaracus. Another contained huge blood rubies from India and pale diamonds from somewhere inside Africa. The finest work of the master craftsmen of Phoenicia was here: ivory figurines and vases, tiny lamps and goblets, for the men of Tyre and Sidon were accounted the most delicate carvers of ivory in the known world.

Linen so delicate it floated in the air was unveiled, a product of the island of Amorgos. Miletan garments dyed

so cleverly that their colors blended in with one another to form an exotic array of patterns were lifted up and shown about. The craftsmanship of Attican metalworkers was modeled in Colchis silver and in Aromaspian gold. There was tin in small ingots from the misty islands that lay northwestward of the great continent beyond the Inland Sea. Amber from the northern seas and the stonework of Epidauros was on display. The famous woolen shawls of Pellene were passed from hand to hand.

Never had such treasures been gathered together before. Men marveled and knew envy. Women gasped and bit down on their lips to stifle the greed in their hearts.

"All this could be yours, Solomon! Your armies and the navies of a united Sheba and Tyre could give it to you. Make yourself ruler of the world! Be king of Iberia and Latium, Phrygia and Syrtis!"

Solomon sighed. His heart was filled with pride that such honor was being paid to him before his people. Glowing eyes were turned in his direction by his merchants and courtiers. He knew what they were thinking as he would have known had they shouted it aloud. Later generations would talk of Solomon and his glory in whispers. This was the reality. But with his pride, he knew a strange new humility.

"You tempt me, Balkis. You make a career of tempting me, it seems, in one way or another. But it can never be."

"Why not?" she whispered fiercely.

"My God has forbidden it. Yahweh spoke to me after I left the lands of Sheba. He created the earth and every living thing on it. He owns it now. What could I ever hope to give Him?"

Balkis paced between two great diorite urns trimmed with golden bars. "And yourself? Must you always subjugate yourself to this Yahweh?"

Anohbet came forward at that, smiling gently. "Yahweh is the one true God. He gives us everything we have."

Balkis glowered. This Egyptian woman was as lovely as herself, and evidently as learned in the love arts. But an inner voice told Balkis that it was no woman that put this inner radiance in Solomon. In Sheba he had been a big adventurer with an iron sword at his side and a kingly manner to his walk. Now . . .

It came to Balkis of Sheba with swift understanding that what she fought was not a man or a woman, but a God. If this Yahweh were the one true God, then all her own gods were nothing but graven images fashioned to appease the fear in men. The true God could do anything, and was all-powerful. It was Yahweh Who made Solomon stand forth among his fellows with wisdom and understanding glowing in his dark eyes. Yahweh it was Who gave him the inner serenity that let him reject the world.

As she paused in indecision, Balkis found her eyes caught by the intent face of the Assyrian trader who had suggested this caravan visit to her. Intrigued by the queer smile with which he regarded her, she stared. Furtively he gestured, and Balkis nodded and with a motion of her hand summoned him forward.

"Can this Yahweh raise a dead man back to life?" he asked. "If Yahweh is such a God, let Him prove it!"

"On whom?"

"On Solomon himself! Surely his God would not let Solomon die for the sake of a little poison?"

Balkis gasped. Assassination was foreign to her nature, but Solomon was lost to her forever. She knew that now. A dead Solomon would mean a weak Israel. The trade her country lost when Solomon began sending out his galleys from Ezion-Geber would revert to her. Saba would again grow rich, and her queen greater than before.

"Arrange a riddle contest," counseled Nerkal. "Just Your Highness and Solomon, alone in a Palace chamber. It should be easy, while he ponders on Your Highness' puzzles, to introduce hemlock into his wine goblet."

"No," she said at last. "We are displeased with your suggestion. It is not in our heart to kill him, even though his death might make our country great. We forbid you to do it!"

Nerkal smiled and shrugged, and bowed low. Let Balkis forbid it if she would; he could arrange to have hemlock introduced into the wine carafe that would be left with them in the chamber. A dead Solomon and a dead Balkis might spell profit to Nerkal. It would seem that they died together in a suicide pact. The young son of Solomon, Rehoboam, would come to the throne. And Nerkal was sure that he could turn such an arrangement to his benefit.

A living Solomon and a living Balkis meant that there would be no conquered world, and no governorship for Nerkal of Haran. He would go back to being a caravan trader after having, like Balkis herself, seen a dream materialize before his eyes and die.

It would be easy. He would take a jar of wine as a gift of Balkis to the Palace chamberlain. When that official had put it in the riddle room, a knife between his ribs would seal his lips forever. They would be behind locked doors, heavily guarded. None would go in or out until they were dead. Aie! Thanks to Moloch of the burning belly! The deed would be done, and he would be in a position to make himself important here in Israel, or if not in Israel, then in Sheba, where there was no heir.

Nerkal chuckled to himself. Of such things were kingdoms made! As he walked deep in thought, he did not see a woman with graying hair who drew back in alarm at sight of him.

Naomi, who had been wife to Jothab, stared hard at the Assyrian. She had seen him before, in her patio garden and again while he played draughts with Jothab. When she had seen him last, a big man named Ogoth, a mercenary soldier, had been with him.

The room was very quiet. Solomon sat in a backless armchair, brooding at Balkis, who stood beside a recessed stone window, a curious smile on her face. She wore loose Persian trousers banded at her ankles and her waist with strips of leopard fur. A short tunic reached to her thighs, fringed and decorated with Tyrian dyework. Golden slippers were on her feet. Her black hair was caught in a gold net hung with pearls.

"Well, Solomon? Is my very first riddle so difficult?"

He smiled. "To tell you what it is that has its eyes always open, yet sees nothing? That is simple. A packet of needles! No, it is another thing that troubles me. But do not concern yourself with it."

Balkis turned and stared out the window. There was despair in her voice, and tears formed in her eyes. "Can I do nothing to shake you, Solomon? Can't I remind you of the days and the nights in Sheba? The gardens where you and I first met? The bedchamber couch where we were so many things to each other? Is there no key by which I can unlock your understanding?"

He came to his feet and moved toward a tripod table that held a tray, a silver carafe, and goblets. His hand touched the cold silver, then fell away. "Yahweh has forbidden me, Sheba. I cannot."

She swung around, and now he could see the tears glistening on her cheeks. "Solomon! I love you!"

"I loved you too, once. Now . . . "

He shrugged, frowning down at the carafe. Balkis hurried forward, coming with eager strides on her turned-up sandals. She came very near him, until her fingers closed down on his wrists.

"Look at me and tell me you do not love me! Look at me!"

She was a woman now, not a queen; a scented, soft woman whose embrace he had known. For a long moment Solomon stared into those dark, pleading eyes. Balkis was

different from Anohbet as the squally, stormy *seistan* differs from the hot and fiery simoom. If he could have his will, he would own both women. He would seat Sheba beside Anohbet, the foremost two among all his wives.

Yet he could not have his way, for Yahweh had forbidden it.

Sighing, he reached for the carafe and poured wine into the two silver goblets. One he handed to her.

"I do not want wine," she said harshly, gesturing away the cup.

"Drink it," he said softly.

She took the cup and lifted it to her mouth.

Solomon watched, waiting until the wine was almost between her lips. Then his arm came up and knocked it away, so that a stream of the red liquid splashed across her tunic, plastering it against the ivory flesh beneath.

"Would you die so willingly?" he asked.

Her eyes widened, and now there was a trace of fear in them. Wildly she stared at the fallen goblet, then at the silver carafe.

"Poisoned?" she whispered.

"Yesterday Naomi came to me. She is the widow of Jothab, my brother whom I ordered slain after his rebellion failed. She recognized one of the men in your entourage as a frequent visitor to her home before Jothab ran away to Gaza. I went to look at him myself this morning."

Balkis waited, curious. Solomon was convinced that she knew nothing of this plan to assassinate him, then. She was not that good an actress.

"Do you remember when I first saw you? In your palace gardens? There was blood on my sword, from a fight. The man who set the tavern drinkers on me followed me from Israel with a big Milesian named Ogoth, to kill me. Probably for a reward from Jothab. This man named Nerkal in your train is that man."

"Astarte!" she whispered, paling. "I did not know!"

Solomon turned and clapped his hands. The big sandalwood doors swung open and mailed guardsmen entered, dragging a terrified Nerkal with them They flung him on the tiled floor before Solomon and Balkis.

"I'll give you a boon, Assyrian," said Solomon. "You may have your choice between a quick death and a slow and lingering one. A death that takes an ax the time it needs to travel through your neck—or a week of hot coals and pincers, and molten lead poured over your flesh."

The Assyrian shook in his fright.

"Tell me, Nerkal. Tell me the truth. Whose was the brain that conceived this plan to kill me?"

"I alone am guilty. I thought to make it seem a suicide pact. Mercy, great Solomon. Mercy!"

He turned to Balkis. There was fury in her eyes, and contempt.

"You sought to kill me too!" she whispered.

"Take him away," Solomon said.

Balkis trembled. On unsteady legs she moved across the little chamber and sank into a chair. "This is what it would be like if we chose to overrun the world! There would be assassins in every palace room. Men who sought to reap what we sowed would be ever at our elbows. There would be none we could trust."

"There are always men like that. A ruler must be eternally on his guard. I alerted my soldiers so that when Nerkal came to my chamberlain with this carafe, he was seized. The wine he brought was tested and found to be poisoned. At that time, I was not sure whether you had ordered it."

"And you sought to test me?"

"You almost drank it. You seemed very innocent, but I had to be sure."

Balkis smiled faintly. "It seems futile to talk of love at a time like this. Words are stupid things when the

heart isn't in them." She sighed. "I came originally to talk you into conquering the world. I'll remain to plead for trade treaties. Your ships that bypass Saba deprive my merchants of money they once made through our own fleets. As their queen, I have the duty of protecting them."

Solomon laughed. "From love to business! It's only a short step, isn't it, when the people in love are rulers? You can write your own trade agreements. If we can't conquer the world, let us at least feed and enrich it, and give it what it wants. Perhaps peaceful trading is better than wartime looting. At least, more people will be alive to enjoy it."

Balkis smiled faintly. "I failed as a woman. Perhaps I shall not fail as a queen."

"Is there really any difference?" Solomon wondered.

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